半蔵の門 PATH OF THE ASSASSIN

VOLUME 11

HIKUMA CASTLE

By KAZUO KOIKE & GOSEKI KOJIMA

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Lifelong Friends, with the Same Dreams,
Striving to Grow into a Rising River.

DARK HORSE MANGA™

半蔵の門 PATH OF THE ASSASSIN

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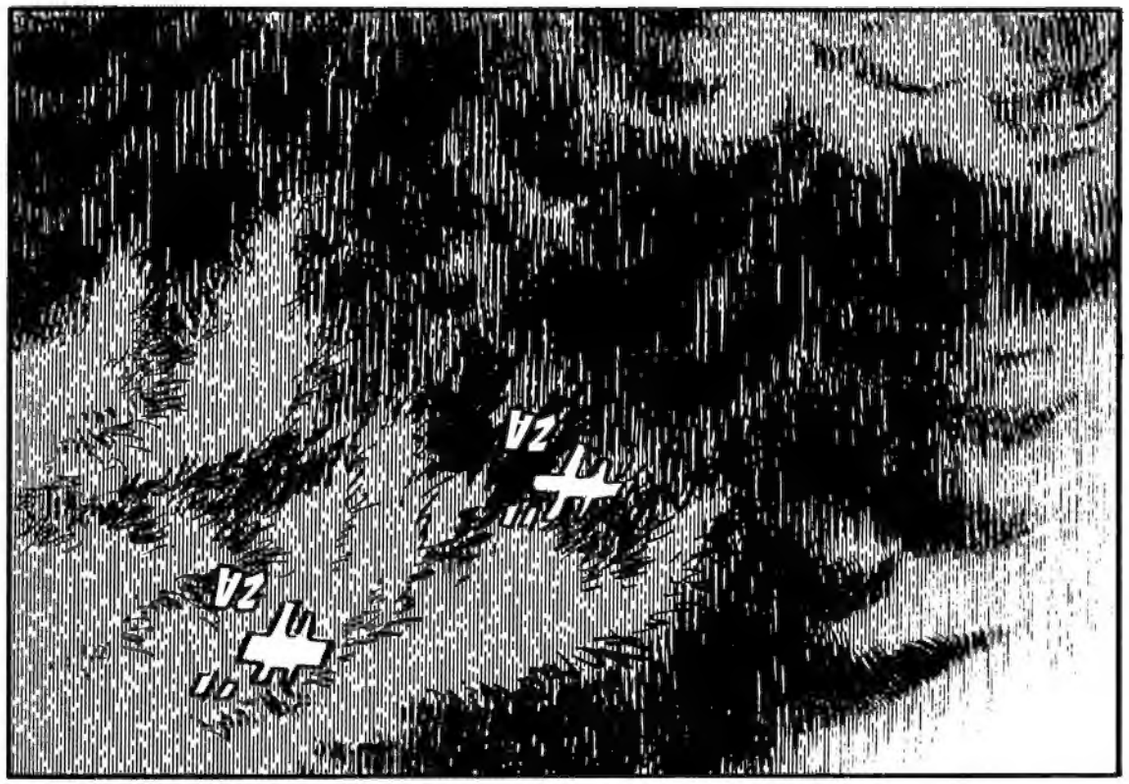
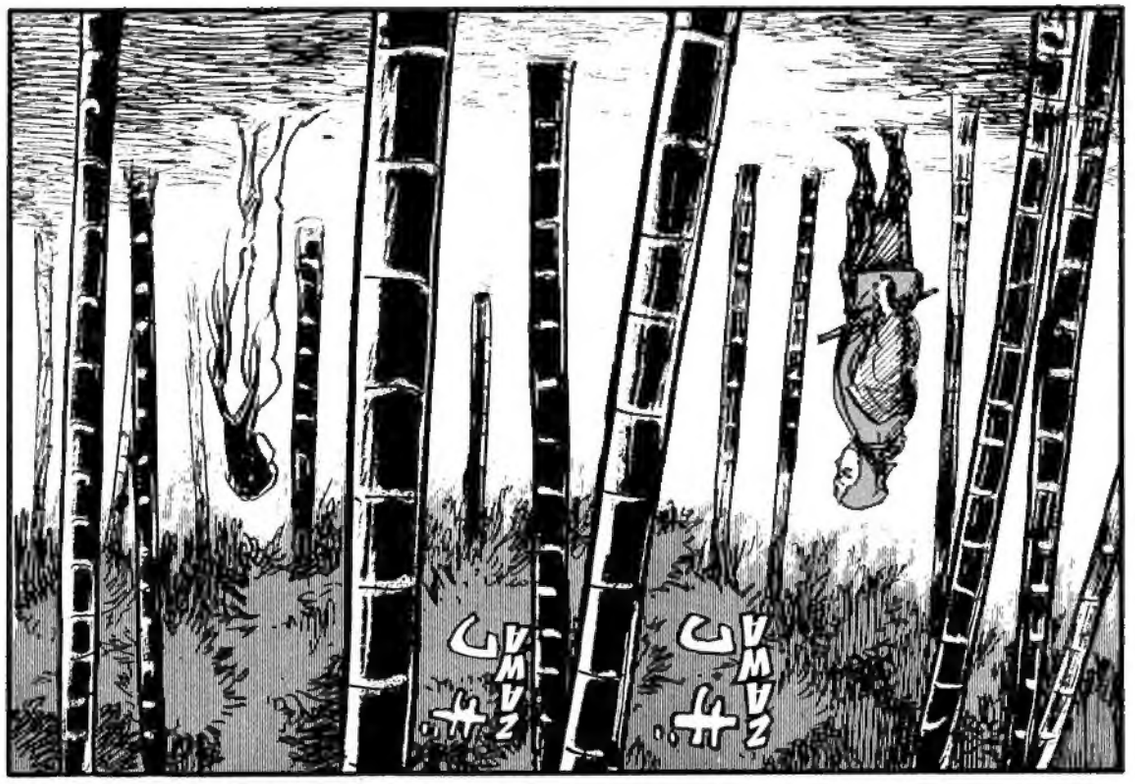
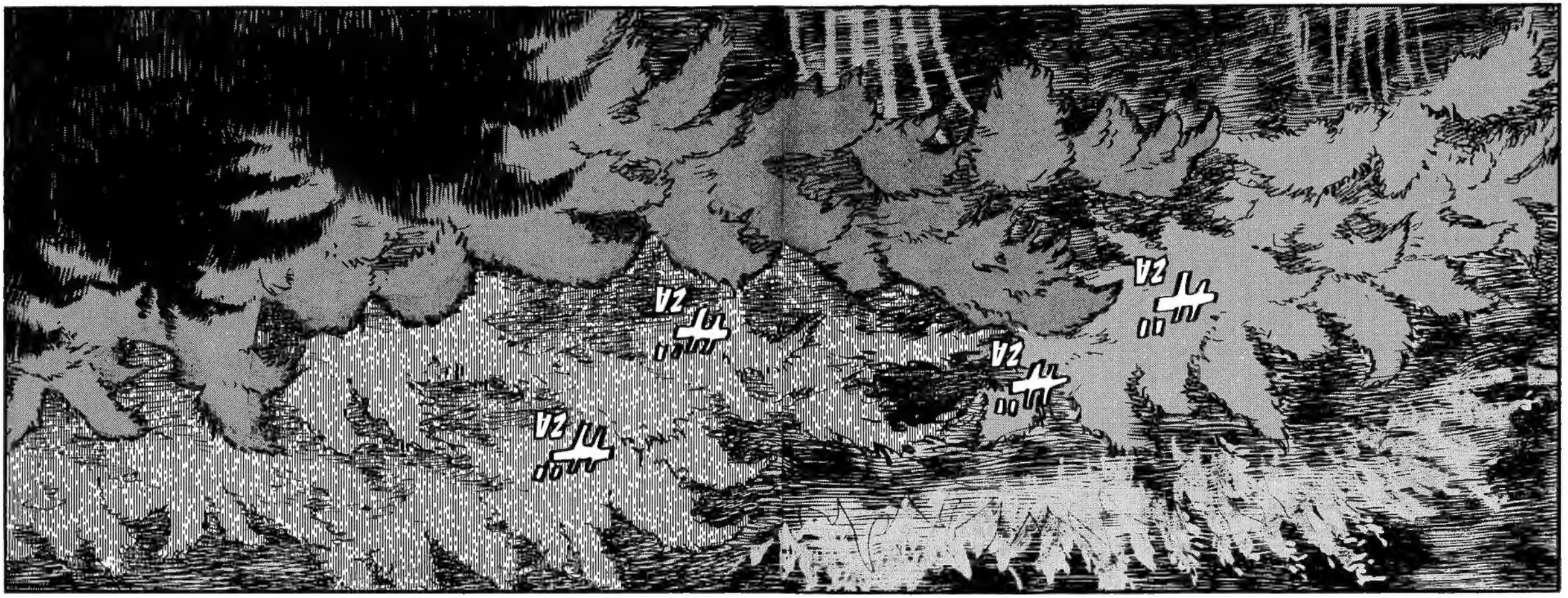
Chapter On Tenka Fubu No. 1: Battle For Power, Part 3







I AM KURONAMI, A TAKEDA *KUNOICHI*. HEH HEH HEH.
YOU LURED ME HERE WITH LIES OF TAKEDA'S GOLD. WHY?
NOT ONLY THAT, YOU ROPED THE OLD MAN INTO YOUR SCHEME. TELL ME WHY!
BEFORE I DO...
DON'T YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY AN IGA *SUPPA*, THE FAMED NECK-READY JŌKO, WOULD LOWER HIMSELF TO BE MY PUPPET...
...AND DO ANYTHING I TOLD HIM?

WELL, UNLESS YOU TASTE MY BODY, YOU WILL NEVER UNDERSTAND.
I AM STANDING BEFORE YOU, NAKED, WITHOUT A SINGLE WEAPON.
THAT'S WHY...
HEH HEH HEH. NERVOUS, ARE YOU?
HOW ABOUT IT, HANZŌ?

WITHOUT TASTING ME, HOW CAN YOU BURY JŌKO? WHAT WORDS OF TRIBUTE COULD YOU OFFER HIM?
AND WHAT COULD YOU TELL THE IGAMONO? HEH HEH HEH.
BYU
THE STRUGGLE IS IN THE WAITING, ALWAYS WAITING!
SHINOBI MEANS TO ENDURE BY HOLDING A BLADE IN ONE'S HEART, HANZŌ.
TUK

WHY DON'T YOU HIT MY BODY NOT WITH *KUNAI* BUT WITH YOUR HEART?
ZA
ZA
ZA
ZA
ZAAAA

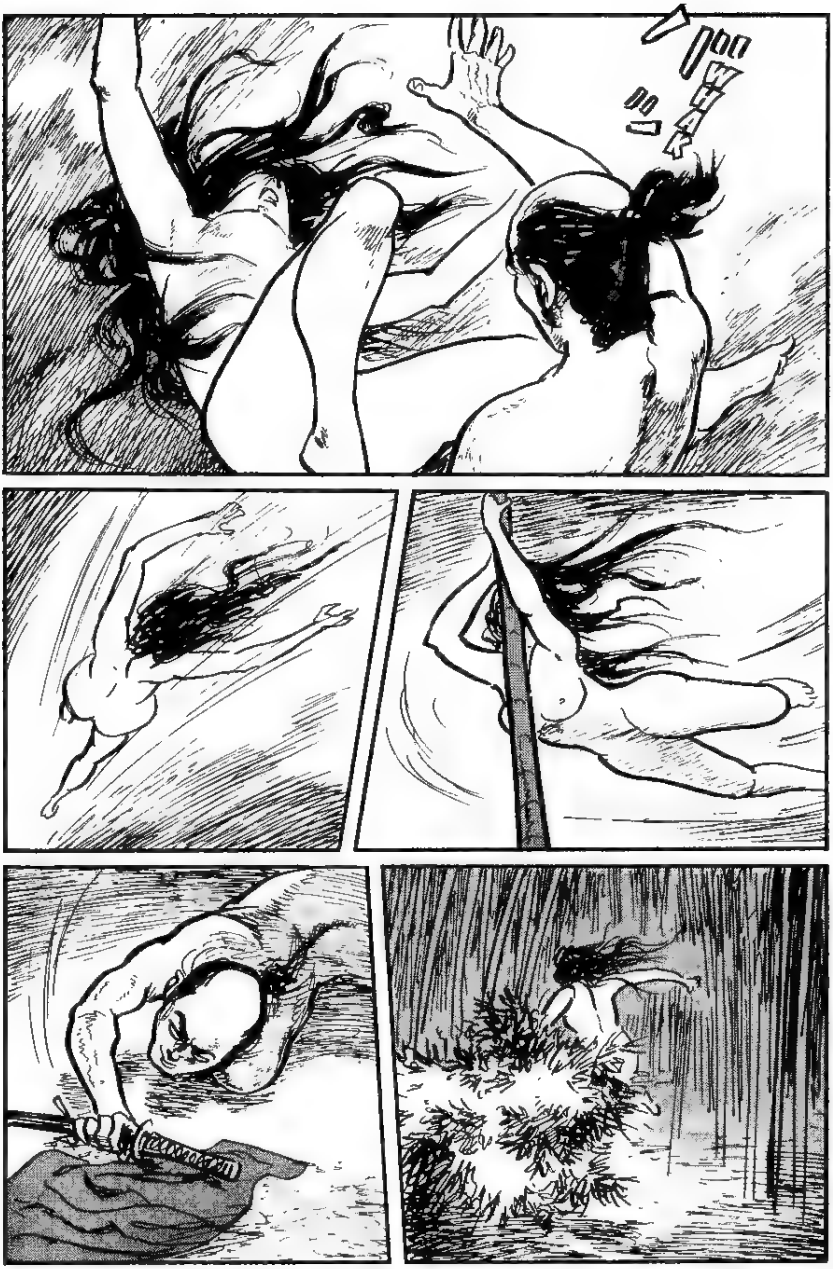
OHH...
OHH...

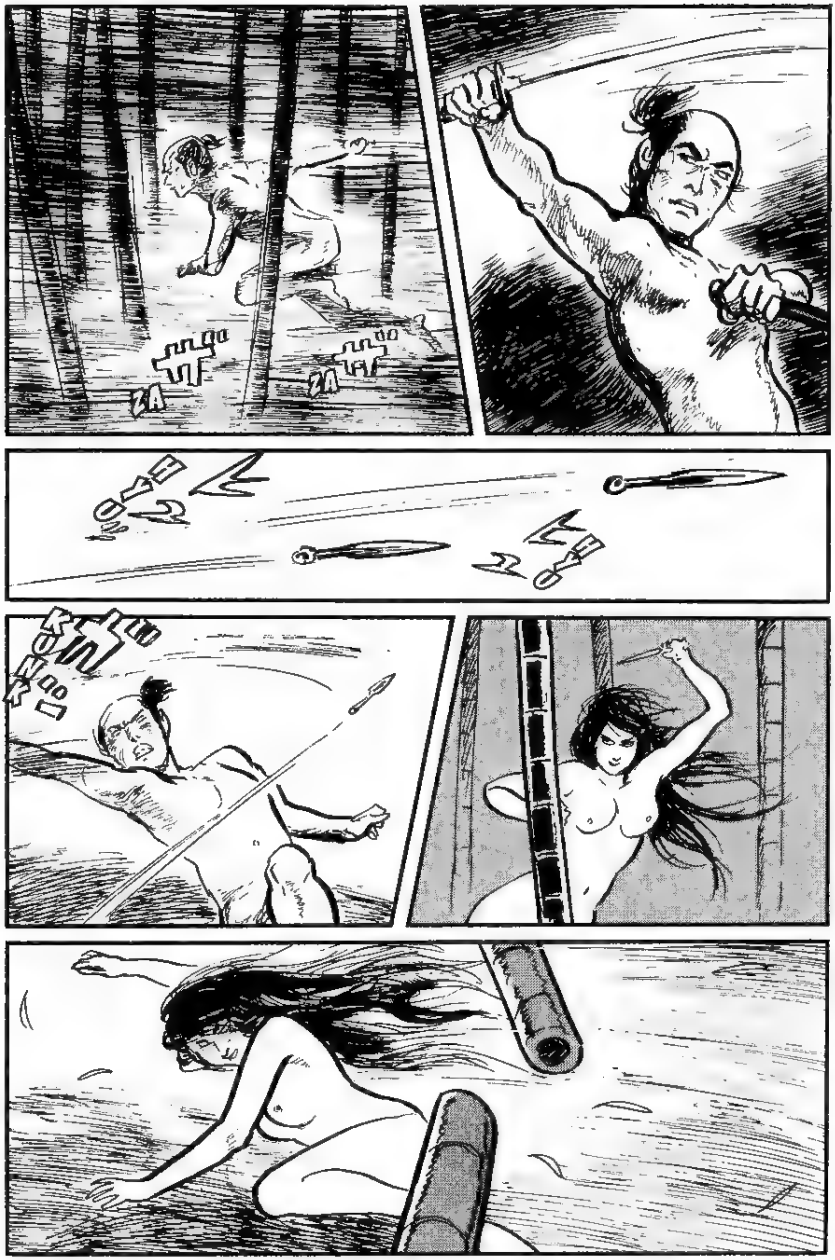
AHHH!!
NO WONDER YOU'RE THE BEST OF IGA, HANZŌ.
AHHH. IT'S GOOD.
IT'S GOOD.
HYU... SHURU SHURU
HYU... SHURU SHURU

UR...
SHURU
SHURU
SHURU
AAHHH
SHURU
SHURU
MMG...
SHURU
SHURU
SHURU
SHURU
LAPS AND DRAWS. TIGHTENS AND OPENS.
BIG WAVE, SMALL WAVE... KURONAMI THE BLACK WAVE...
AND OPENS!
IT'S GOOD, ISN'T IT? IT TIGHTENS!

URR...
SIDEWAYS, LONGWAYS, AND DIAGONAL-LY!
UP AND DOWN. FROM THE TIP TO THE BASE.
SHIFF
SHIFF

あ!
AH!
ズン
ZUN
AAHHH!!
MORE!!
MORE...
AAHHH.
AAHHH
AAHHH!
IT'S
GOOD.





TOK
TOK
TOK

YOU CAN'T CUT BAMBOO WITH GOLD IN IT! HEH HEH HEH.

UGH...
UG...
RTCH
RTCH
IT'S SO STRONG AND FLEXIBLE, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO CUT.
HEH HEH HEH. I GATHER MORE THAN TEN SPIDERS A DAY, MASH THEM TO PULP, AND APPLY THE GOO AS I COMB MY HAIR.

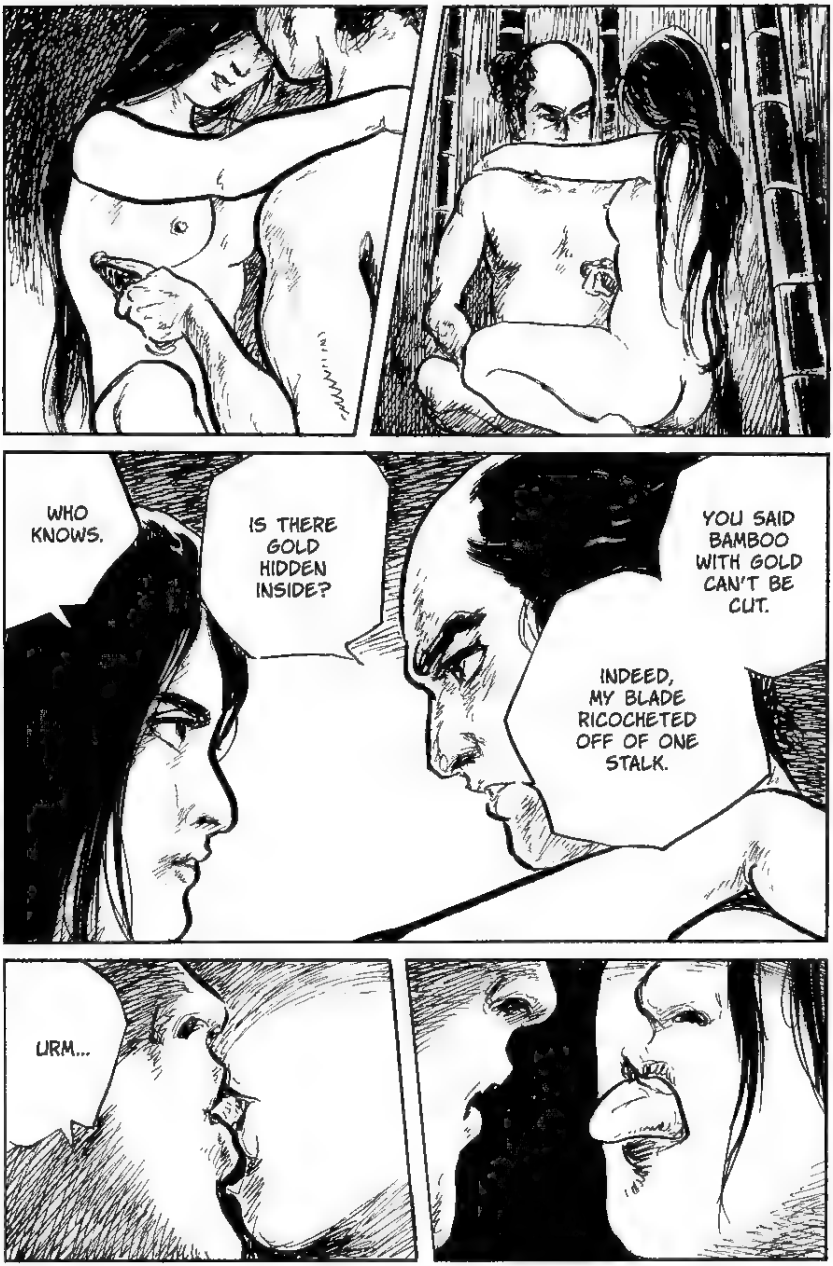
IT TIGHTENS GRADUALLY, BREAKING THE SKIN, CUTTING INTO THE FLESH.
IT'S SO FINE, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO GRAB OR PUT A FINGER IN.
I AM KURONAMIKO, THE DAUGHTER OF UMEBOSHI, A TAKEDA *SUPPA* ALSO KNOWN AS MOZU, WHOM YOU KILLED!
HEH HEH HEH HEH.
URG...
WHAT WILL YOU DO, HANZŌ, THE BEST OF IGA? YOU CAN'T ESCAPE NOW.

MMG.
I HEREBY AVENGE MY FATHER!
HOW DOES IT FEEL TO STARE INTO HELL?
DIE, HANZŌ! WRIGGLE IN PAIN! UNTIL YOU BREATHE NO MORE!

HO
HO
HO
HO
HO
HO
HO
HO
HO
HO
HO HO
HO
HO HO
HO.
...
...
...
...
HO...

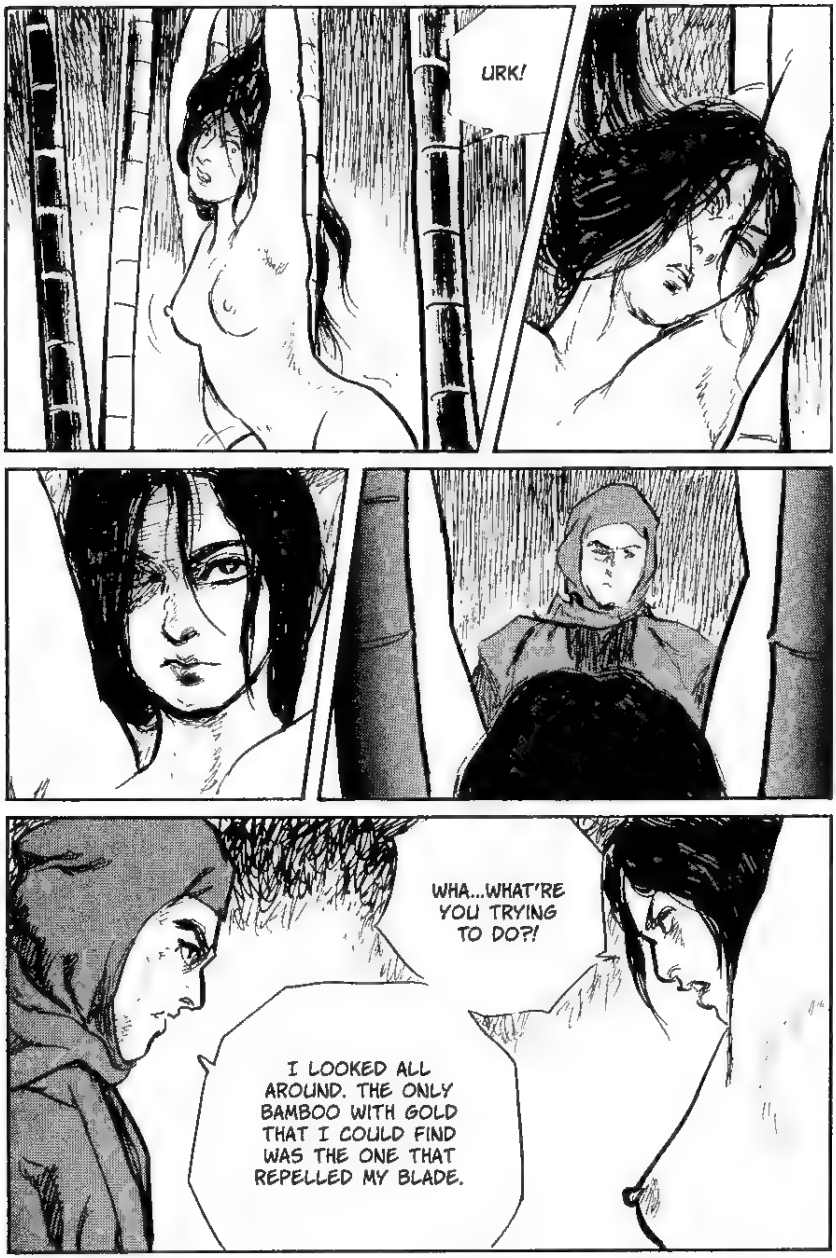
IF YOU MOVE, EVEN AN INCH...
GUN...!
G...
YOU'RE DEAD!
THE SAME REASON SHOULD STOP YOU NOW. IF YOU SHOOT, OTHERS WILL HEAR.
DO YOU THINK I WOULD'VE LET YOU HEAR IT?
WHY...?
WHY...? WHY DIDN'T YOU USE IT WHEN YOU FOUGHT JŌKO?

IF I DO, YOU WON'T SHOOT ME?
NOW GET THE HAIR OFF OF ME, SLOWLY.
IF THEY DO, THEN I'LL DEAL WITH THEM.
IF I DON'T HAVE TO. IT'S NOT MY WISH TO KILL YOU.
PLACE YOUR HANDS BESIDE MY NECK.
COME AROUND IN FRONT OF ME--FROM THE RIGHT.

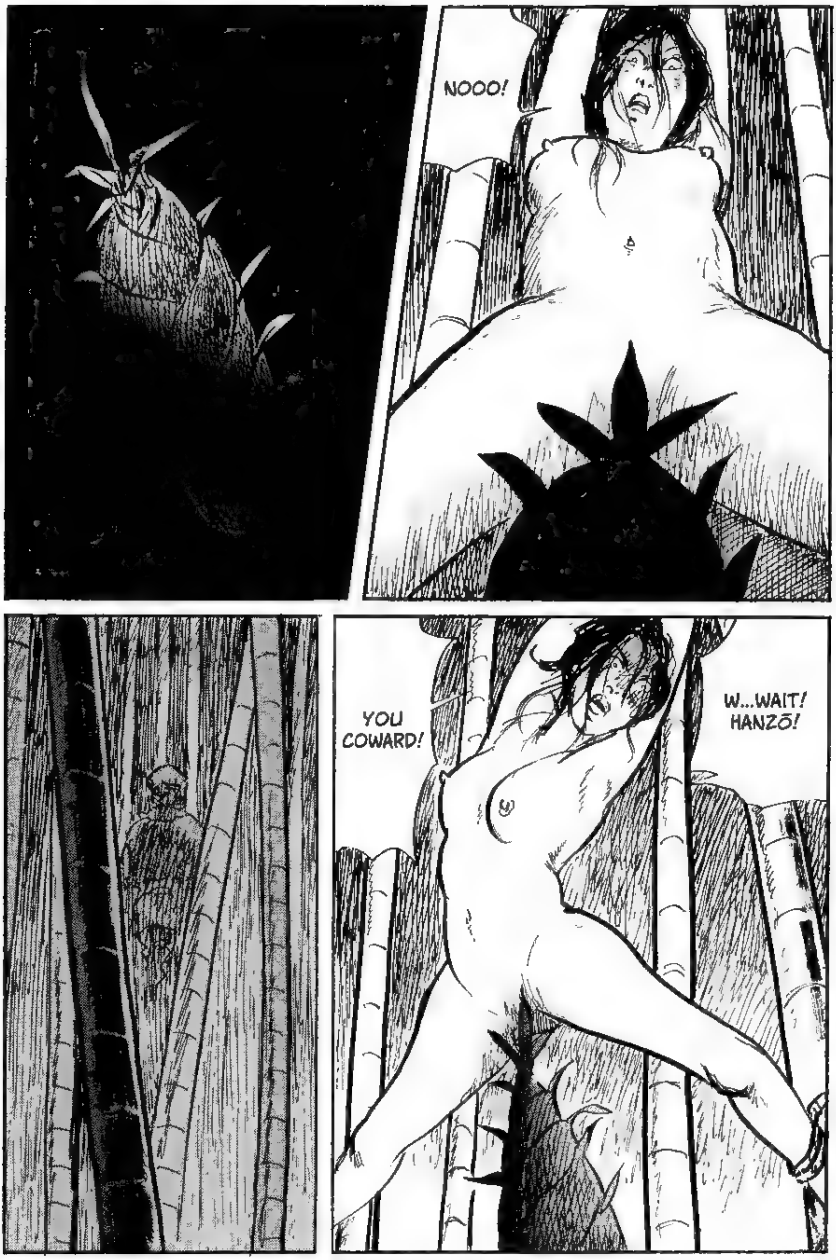

WHO KNOWS.
IS THERE GOLD HIDDEN INSIDE?
YOU SAID BAMBOO WITH GOLD CAN'T BE CUT.
INDEED, MY BLADE RICOCHETED OFF OF ONE STALK.
URM...

LET'S RESUME WHERE WE LEFT OFF. I'LL LET YOU COME.
WAHH

HMM.


URK!
WHA...WHAT'RE YOU TRYING TO DO?!
I LOOKED ALL AROUND. THE ONLY BAMBOO WITH GOLD THAT I COULD FIND WAS THE ONE THAT REPELLED MY BLADE.

CUT THEM ALL ONE AT A TIME, WHY DON'T YOU?
THERE ARE JUST TOO MANY TO CHECK.
ARE THERE ANY OTHERS?
?!
YOU'D BETTER FIND AN ESCAPE BY TOMORROW MORNING. FAREWELL.


NOOO!
YOU COWARD!
W...WAIT! HANZŌ!

あ
あ
AAHHHH
あ
あ
AAHHHH

I HOOKED JŌKO WITH IT. I LURED HIM OUT AND MADE HIM MY SLAVE. AND I KNEW YOUR SWORD WOULD BOUNCE OFF WHEN IT HIT...
ONE... ONLY ONE!
THE GOLD?

AHHH
SWEE
THE NEXT TIME WE MEET, I HOPE WE ARE JUST A MAN AND A WOMAN.
TUK

BEARING ASHIKAGA YOSHIAKI BEFORE HIM, NOBUNAGA MARCHED ON THE CAPITAL LIKE A CRASHING STORM. AFTER WINNING THE SURRENDER OF MINOTSUKURI CASTLE FROM ROKKAKU SHŌTEI WITHIN A MERE TWENTY-FIVE DAYS, NOBUNAGA BROUGHT UNDER HIS CONTROL MOST OF THE FIVE PROVINCES OF *KINAI*, I.E., YAMATO, YAMASHIRO, KAWACHI, IZUMI AND SETTSU.

トゥーム

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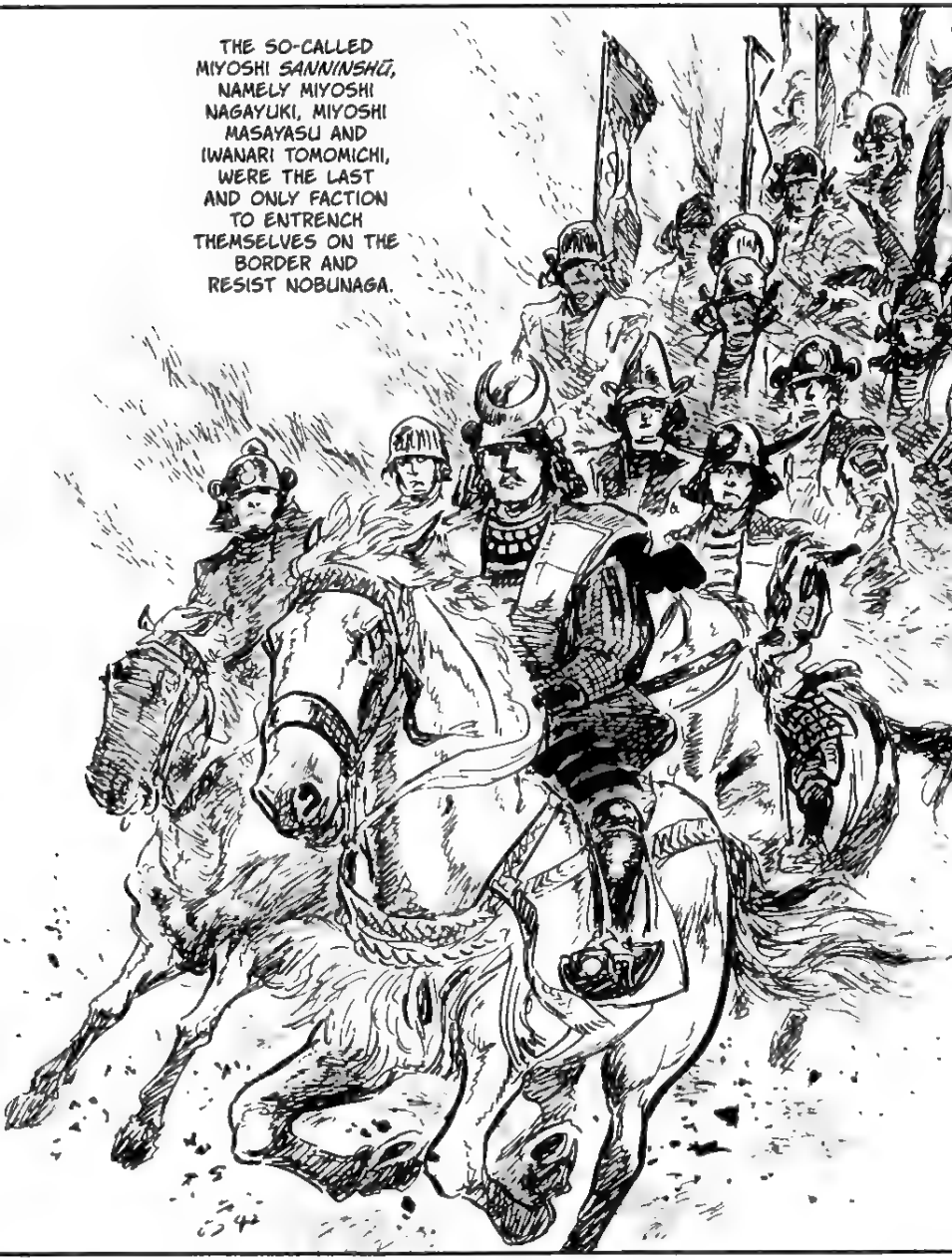
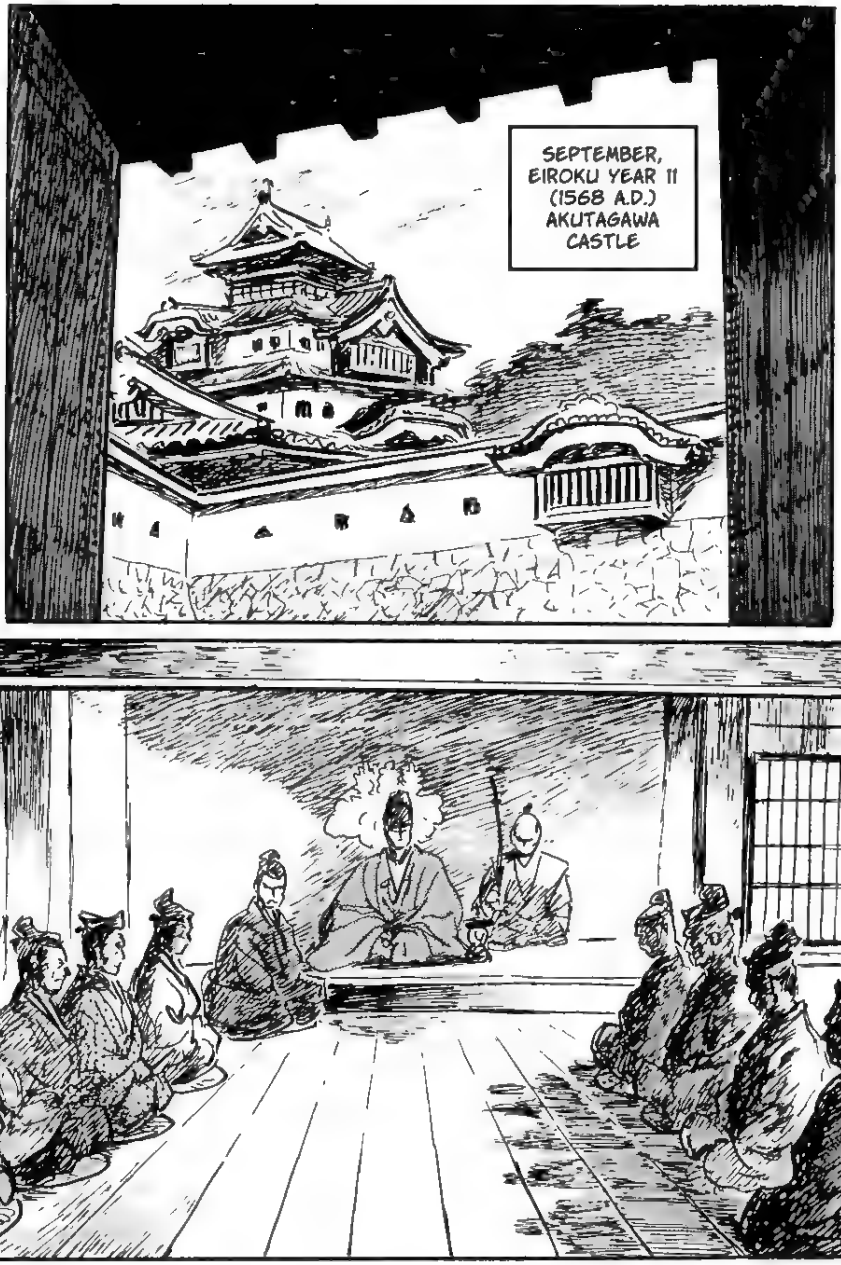
MATSUNAGA HISAHIDE AND MIYOSHI YOSHITSUGU HAD ALREADY RAISED THE WHITE FLAG AND SURRENDERED TO NOBUNAGA.


THE SO-CALLED MIYOSHI SANNINSHŪ, NAMELY MIYOSHI NAGAYUKI, MIYOSHI MASAYASU AND IWANARI TOMOMICHI, WERE THE LAST AND ONLY FACTION TO ENTRENCH THEMSELVES ON THE BORDER AND RESIST NOBUNAGA.


SEPTEMBER,
EIROKU YEAR 11
(1568 A.D.)
AKUTAGAWA
CASTLE

BOTH MATSUNAGA HISAHIDE AND MIYOSHI YOSHITSUGU ARE TRAITORS. THEY MURDERED MY BROTHER YOSHITERU!

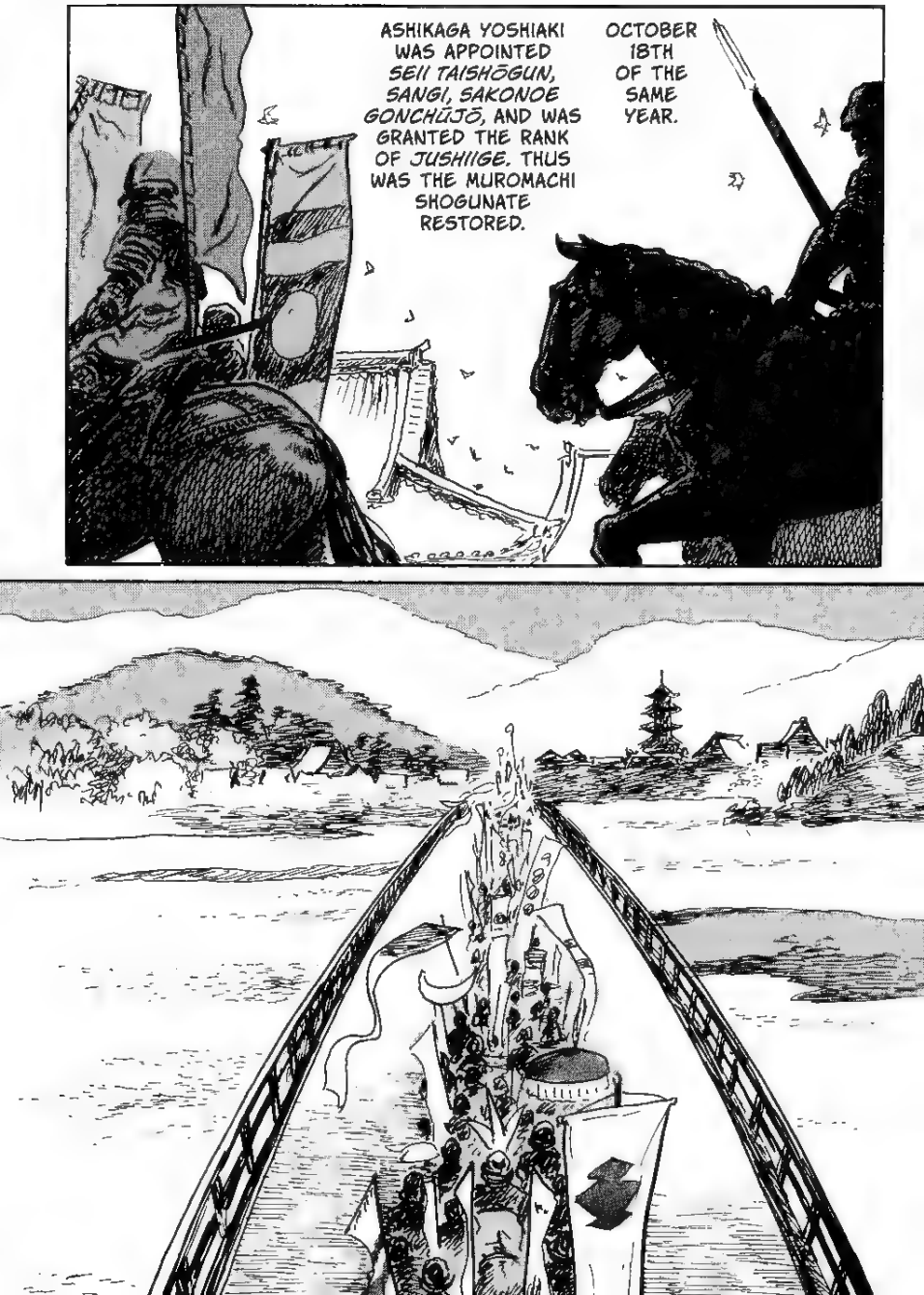
BEHEAD THEM IMMEDIATELY, NOBUNAGA-DONO!
YES.
MITSU-HIDE.
IT'S NATURAL FOR YOSHIAKI-SAMA TO BE ANGRY, INDEED.
YES SIR.
YOU HEARD YOSHIAKI-SAMA'S THOUGHTS ON THE MATTER. NOW TELL US YOUR VIEW.

HOWEVER, IF WE BEHEAD MIYOSHI YOSHITSUGU-*DONO* NOW, IT WILL DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD.
THE MIYOSHI FACTION IS SCATTERED ACROSS *KINAI*. BEHEADING HIM COULD CAUSE THEM TO COME TOGETHER.
AND NO DOUBT THE MIYOSHI *SANNINSHŪ* WILL MAKE THEIR MOVE AS SOON AS THEY SEE THE FACTION UNITE.
I BELIEVE THE EFFECTIVE WAY TO QUIET THE REMNANTS IS TO GIVE MIYOSHI YOSHITSUGU-*DONO* A WARM RECEPTION INSTEAD.

THERE ARE STILL SUBVERSIVE MOVEMENTS ALL AROUND YAMATO, AND MATSUNAGA-DONO WOULD BE QUITE USEFUL IN SUPPRESSING THEM.
THE SAME APPLIES WITH MATSUNAGA HISAHIDE-DONO.
BESIDES, SINCE THEY BOTH SURRENDERED AND OFFERED YOU TRIBUTE, BEHEADING THEM NOW WOULD BE AGAINST WHAT'S CUSTOMARY FOR SAMURAI.
I DON'T UNDERSTAND WAR VERY WELL. DO WHATEVER YOU BELIEVE IS RIGHT.
MY OPINION COINCIDES EXACTLY WITH MITSUHIDE'S.

AT THIS POINT THERE'S NO ONE WHO'LL OPPOSE YOU!
TO THE CAPITAL, YOSHIAKI-SAMA!
YES SIR.
BALDY RAT!
ISSUE A NOTICE CITING HARSH PUNISHMENT TO THOSE WHO INFLICT VIOLENCE UPON CIVILIANS, CUT DOWN ANY TREES OR BAMBOO WITHOUT PROPER AUTHORITY, OR FORCE SALES OR PURCHASES OR EVICTIONS.
NOW THAT WE'RE ENTERING THE CAPITAL, ENSURE STRICT MILITARY DISCIPLINE.

YES SIR!
YOU TAKE CHARGE AND POLICE IT!
OCTOBER 14TH, EIROKU YEAR 11 (1568 A.D.) NOBUNAGA ENTERS THE CAPITAL.

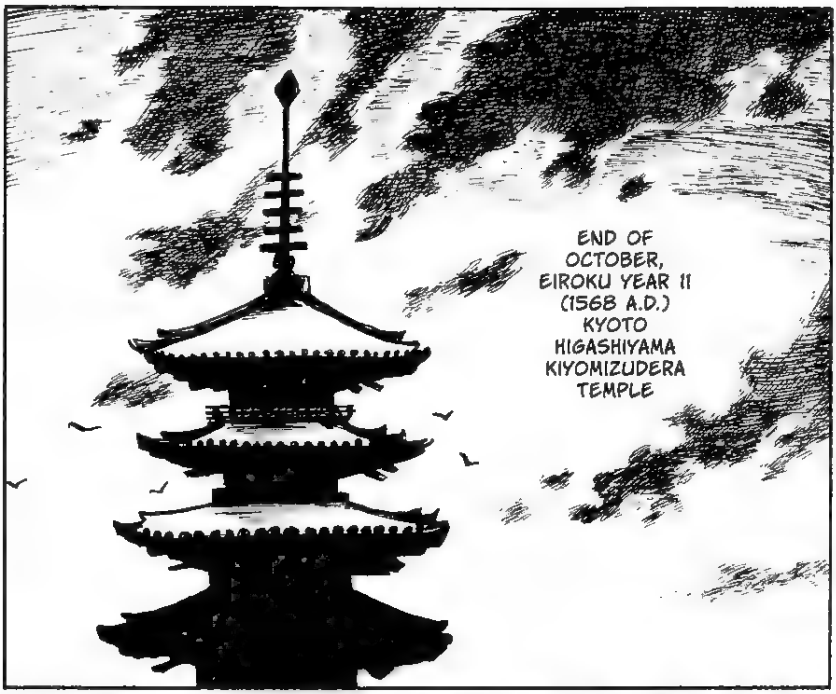

ASHIKAGA YOSHIAKI WAS APPOINTED *SEII TAISHŌGUN, SANGI, SAKONOE GONCHŪJŌ*, AND WAS GRANTED THE RANK OF *JUSHIIGE*. THUS WAS THE MUROMACHI SHOGUNATE RESTORED.
OCTOBER 18TH OF THE SAME YEAR.

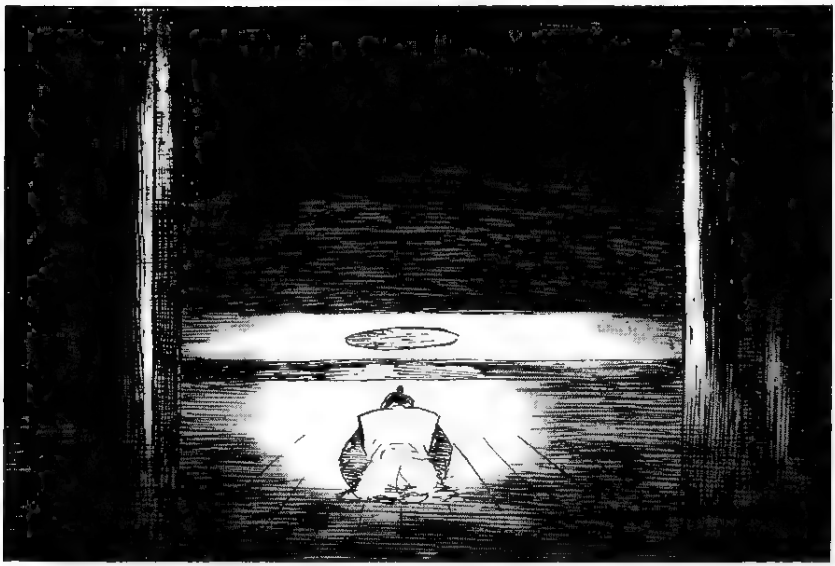
HM.
APPARENTLY YOSHIAKI-SAMA WISHED TO APPOINT NOBUNAGA-SAMA AS HIS DEPUTY SHOGUN OR AN ADMINISTRATOR GENERAL, BUT FROM WHAT I HEAR, NOBUNAGA-SAMA DECLINED EXPLICITLY.
IF HE DID, HE'D END UP ESTABLISHING A DEFINITE MASTER-SERVANT RELATION-SHIP.
WHY... DID HE?
I BELIEVE THAT'S NOBUNAGA-DONO'S RESOLVE.
NEVER STAND IN THE SHADOW OF ANOTHER.

DON'T BE ABSURD. IF HE DID, HE'D BECOME A TARGET.
WHY DOESN'T HE BECOME THE SHOGUN HIMSELF?
ANYHOW, NOBUNAGA-DONO'S BATTLE FOR POWER IS OVER.
STILL, I WONDER WHAT MOVE THE SHOGUN WILL MAKE NEXT.
HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA
IF HE TAKES THE POSITION WITHOUT JUSTIFIABLE AND NOBLE EXCUSES, OTHERS WILL COME AFTER HIM, THE SAME WAY HE WENT AFTER POWER HIMSELF.

NO ONE CAN FORE-SEE THAT.
BUT IF WE KNEW WITH CERTAINTY, LIKE THE WAY WE KNOW THAT WINTER ALWAYS COMES...WE COULD PREPARE OURSELVES TO ENDURE...

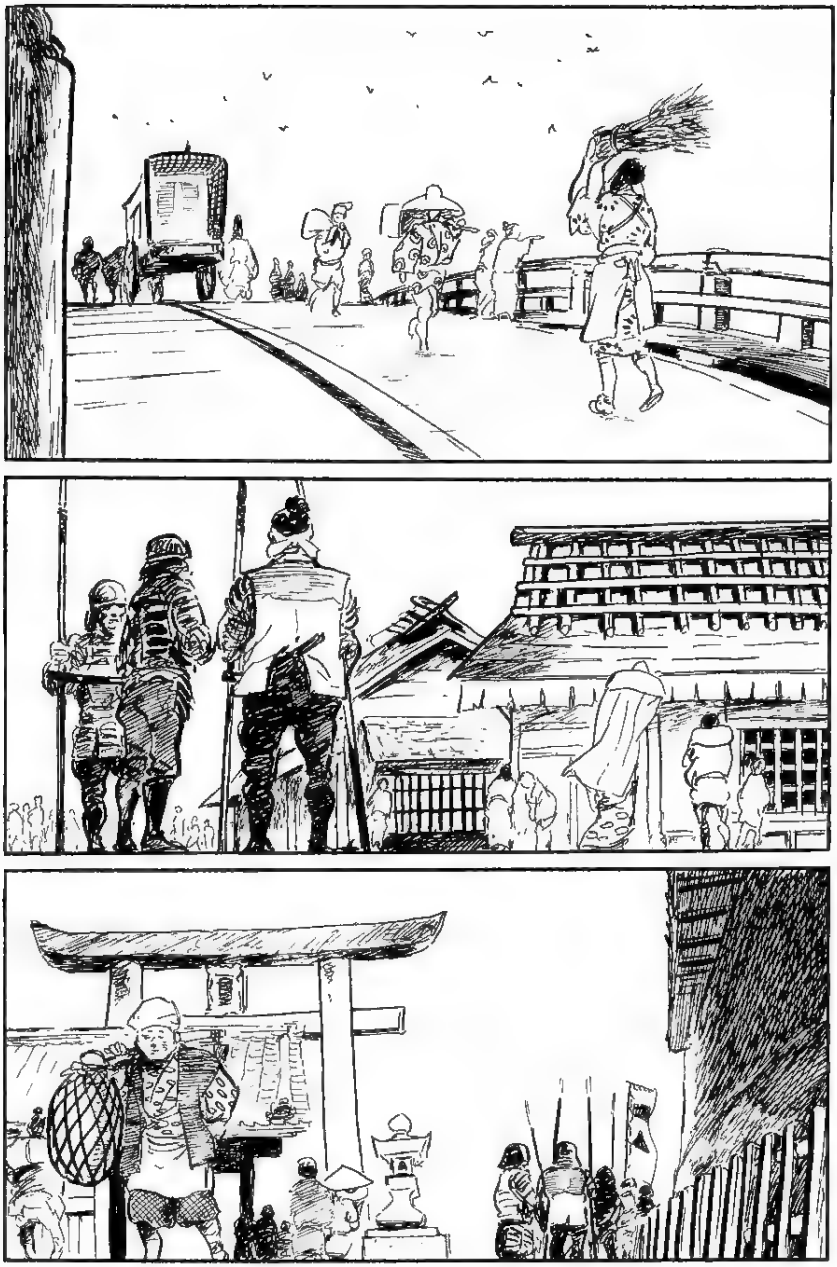
Chapter On Tenka Fubu No. 2: A Colicky Baby


END OF
OCTOBER,
EIROKU YEAR 11
(1568 A.D.)
KYOTO
HIGASHIYAMA
KIYOMIZUDERA
TEMPLE



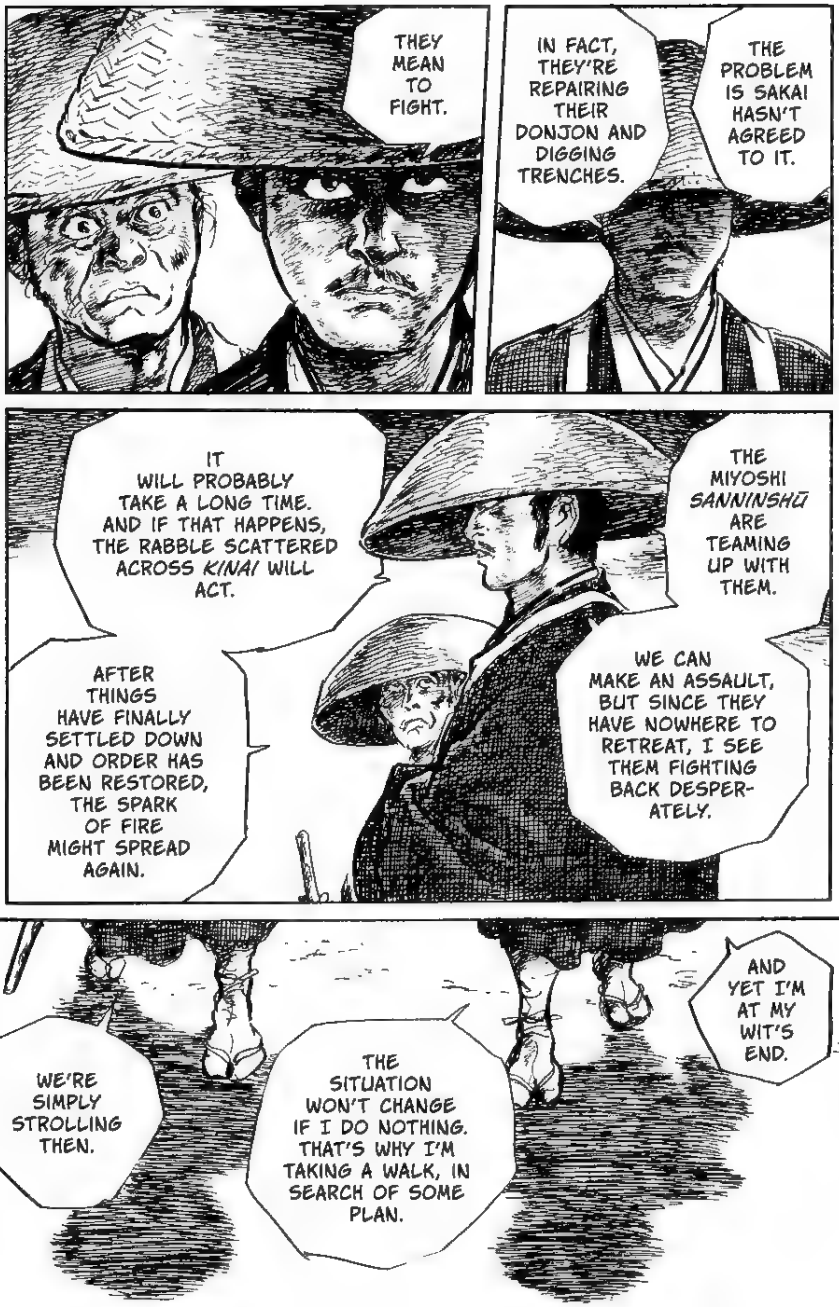
I'M HERE BALDY RAT HAS COME!
MILORD!
MILORD ?!
MILORD.
I HEARD MY PRESENCE IS URGENTLY REQUIRED.

?!
MILORD !!
ENOUGH OF YOUR BLABBER-ING!
YE... YES SIR!
GET YOURSELF DISGUISED AND ACCOMPANY ME.



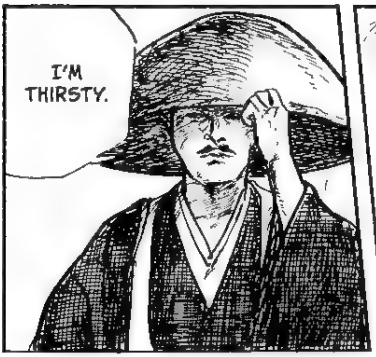
YES SIR.
BALDY RAT.

FIVE THOUSAND *KAN* IS TO BE COLLECTED FROM ISHIYAMA HONGANJI TEMPLE, OVER A THOUSAND FROM NARA, AND TWENTY THOUSAND FROM SAKAI.
YES.
I ORDERED THE PROSPEROUS BUSINESS DISTRICTS INSIDE *KINAI*, ALONG WITH THE TEMPLES AND SHRINES, TO PAY FOR THE COST OF RESTORING THE ASHIKAGA SHOGUNATE. I BELIEVE YOU ALREADY KNOW THIS.


THEY MEAN TO FIGHT.
IN FACT, THEY'RE REPAIRING THEIR DONJON AND DIGGING TRENCHES.
THE PROBLEM IS SAKAI HASN'T AGREED TO IT.
IT WILL PROBABLY TAKE A LONG TIME. AND IF THAT HAPPENS, THE RABBLE SCATTERED ACROSS KINAI WILL ACT.
THE MIYOSHI SANNINSHŪ ARE TEAMING UP WITH THEM.
AFTER THINGS HAVE FINALLY SETTLED DOWN AND ORDER HAS BEEN RESTORED, THE SPARK OF FIRE MIGHT SPREAD AGAIN.
WE CAN MAKE AN ASSAULT, BUT SINCE THEY HAVE NOWHERE TO RETREAT, I SEE THEM FIGHTING BACK DESPERATELY.
AND YET I'M AT MY WIT'S END.
THE SITUATION WON'T CHANGE IF I DO NOTHING. THAT'S WHY I'M TAKING A WALK, IN SEARCH OF SOME PLAN.
WE'RE SIMPLY STROLLING THEN.

KUH?!
THIS IS THE BEST WAY TO COME UP WITH NEW IDEAS.
OF COURSE! HA HA HA HA HA.

HEH HA HA HA HA
HA HA HA HA
HA HA HA HA


I'M THIRSTY.

EXCUSE ME. CAN I HAVE SOME WATER?
NOW EXCUSE ME. MY BABY HAS COLIC, AND I CAN'T PUT HIM DOWN.
THERE'S A WELL BEHIND THE HOUSE. FEEL FREE TO TAKE AS MUCH AS YOU WANT.
THE BABY WON'T CRY SO LONG AS HE'S BEING HELD, BUT AS SOON AS HE'S PUT DOWN TO SLEEP, HE STARTS CRYING.
COLIC...?

COLICKY BABIES ARE RARE, BUT WHEN A MOTHER GETS ONE, SHE HAS TO HOLD HIM WITHOUT A BREAK. SO THEY ARE EXTREMELY HARD ON MOTHERS.
WILL YOU PUT HIM DOWN? I'VE NEVER SEEN ONE BEFORE, SO I'D LIKE TO SEE.
HMM. YOU MUST BE EXHAUSTED THEN.
うあーーあ!
WAAHHHH

MM...
GYAAA
AAHH
LET'S GO BACK!!
WE'LL MOVE OUT OF KYOTO AND RETURN TO GIFU.

HIDEYOSHI AND NOBUMORI, TAKE FIVE THOUSAND MEN AND REMAIN IN KYOTO!! THE REST OF US WILL MOVE OUT OF HERE.

WE'RE DONE HERE IN KYOTO.
WE'RE GOING BACK TO GIFU.

...MY LORD IS.

HOW FORMIDA-BLE...

INDEED.

MILORD AS A MOTHER HATES HOLDING THE BABY CALLED SHOGUN YOSHIAKI-*SAMA*. SO HE'S PUTTING THE BABY DOWN!

AH, I GOT IT. IT'S THE COLIC!

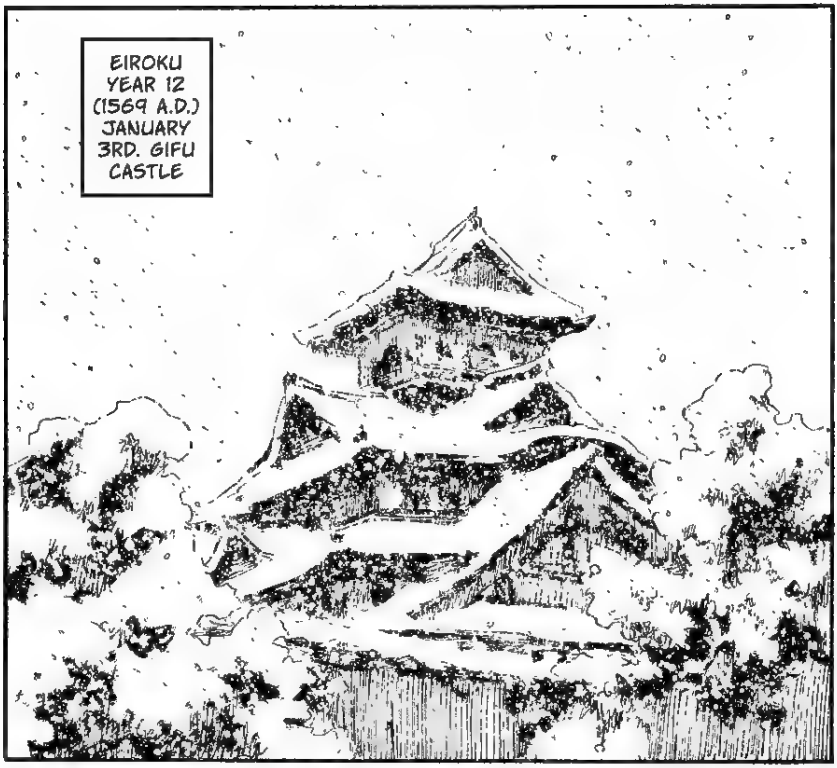
AND SINCE SAKAI WON'T TAKE ANY ACTION, THE MIYOSHI *SANNINSHŪ* WILL ATTACK ON THEIR OWN. HAVING FEIGNED HIS RETURN TO GIFU, MILORD WILL RUSH BACK IMMEDIATELY.

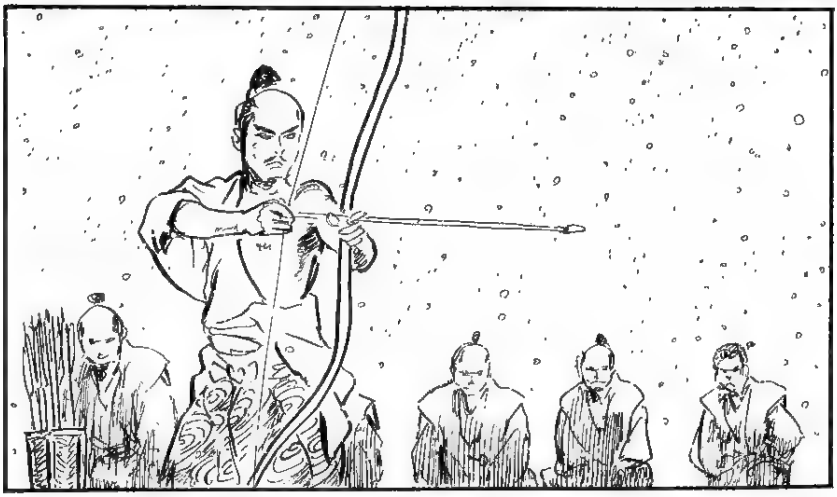
NOT KNOWING WHAT TO DO, YOSHIAKI-*SAMA* WILL CRY IN TEARS. THEN THE MIYOSHI *SANNINSHŪ* WILL STORM IN. THEY'VE BEEN WAIT-ING FOR AN OPPORTUNITY.

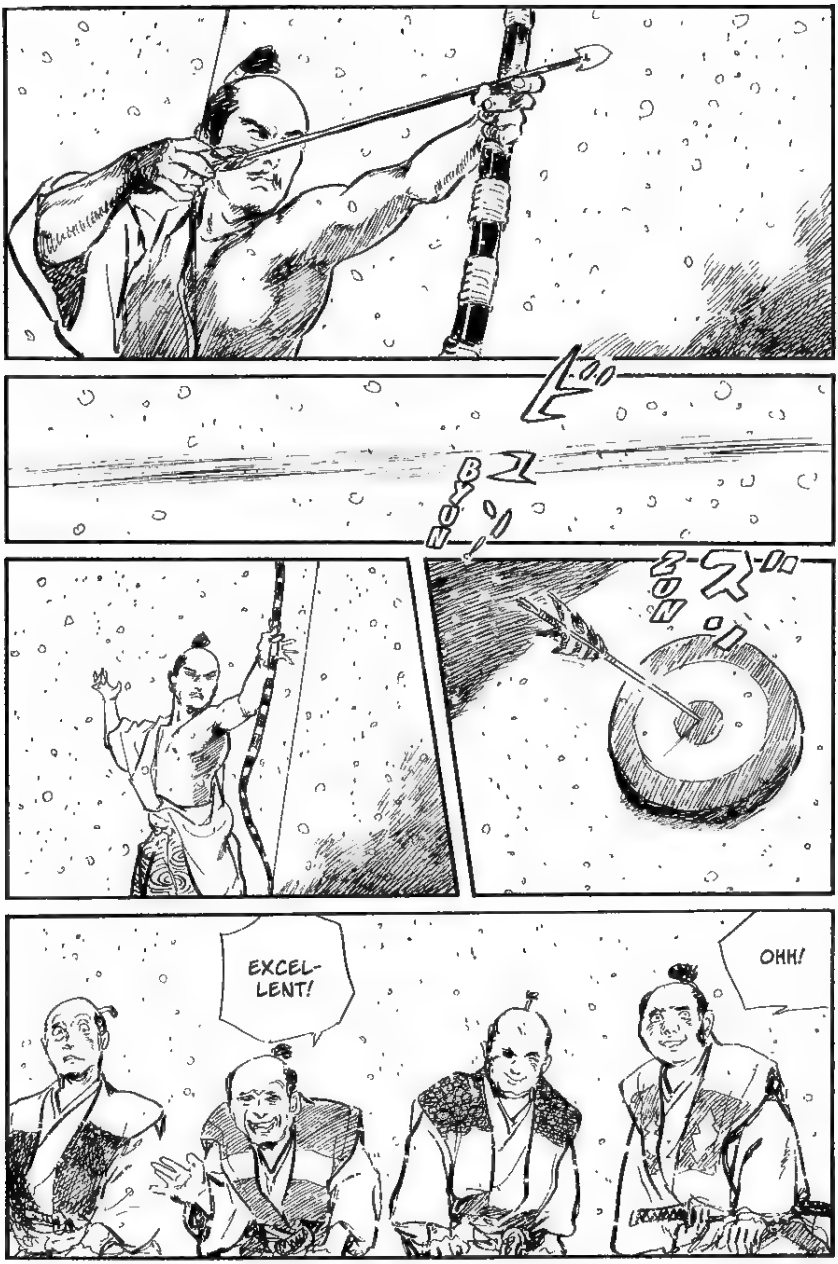
...LEAVING KYOTO BEHIND, NOBUNAGA ARRIVED AT MORIYAMA OF ŌMI. ON THE 27TH, THEY STAYED AT JŌBODAIIN TEMPLE IN KASHIWARA. AND ON THE 28TH, THEY RETURNED TO GIFU CASTLE.

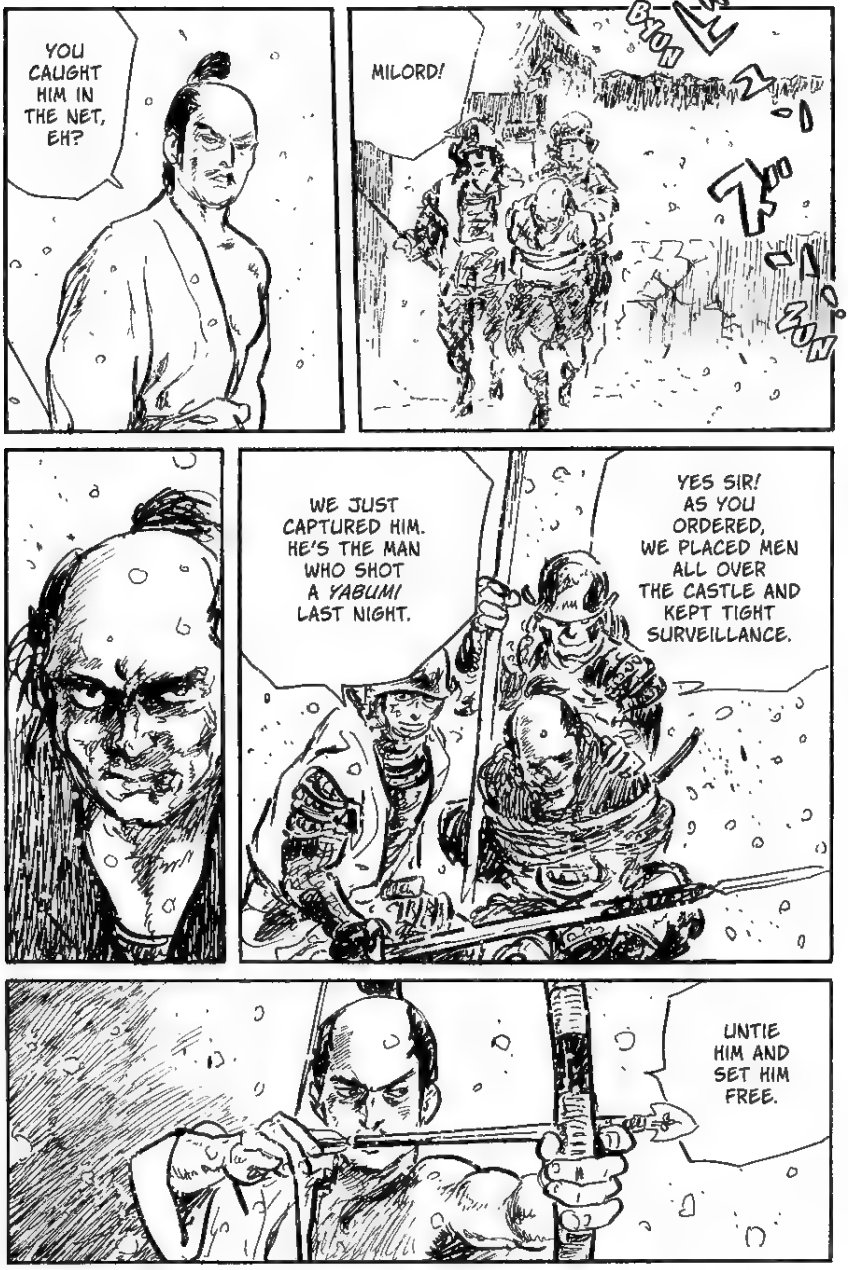
ON OCTOBER 26TH...

WITHOUT NOBUNAGA-*DONO*, WE WON'T BE ABLE TO MAINTAIN PEACE IN KYOTO ANYMORE!
CAN YOU DEFEND US WITH THE MEN YOU HAVE?
WHAT IF THE MIYOSHI *SANNINSHŪ* ATTACK?
AS EXPECTED, HE'S STARTING TO CRY.


EIROKU
YEAR 12
(1569 A.D.)
JANUARY
3RD. GIFU
CASTLE




EXCEL-
LENT!
OHH!

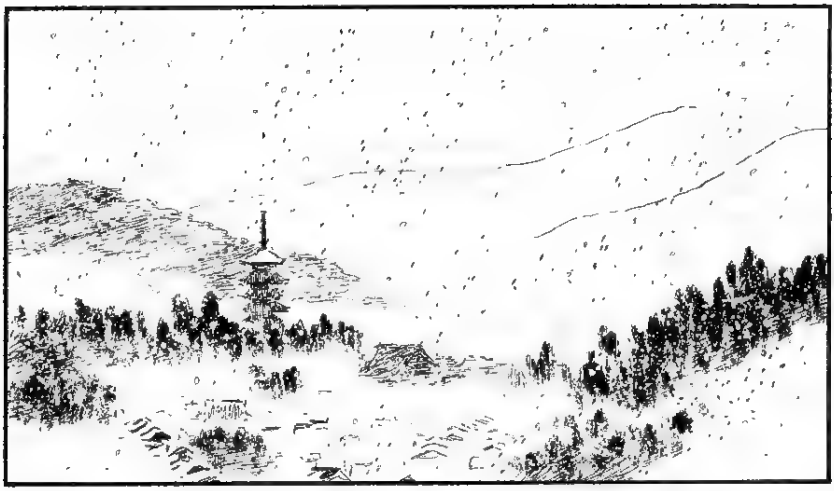

YOU CAUGHT HIM IN THE NET, EH?
MILORD!
BYUN
ZUN
WE JUST CAPTURED HIM. HE'S THE MAN WHO SHOT A YABUMI LAST NIGHT.
YES SIR! AS YOU ORDERED, WE PLACED MEN ALL OVER THE CASTLE AND KEPT TIGHT SURVEILLANCE.
UNTIE HIM AND SET HIM FREE.

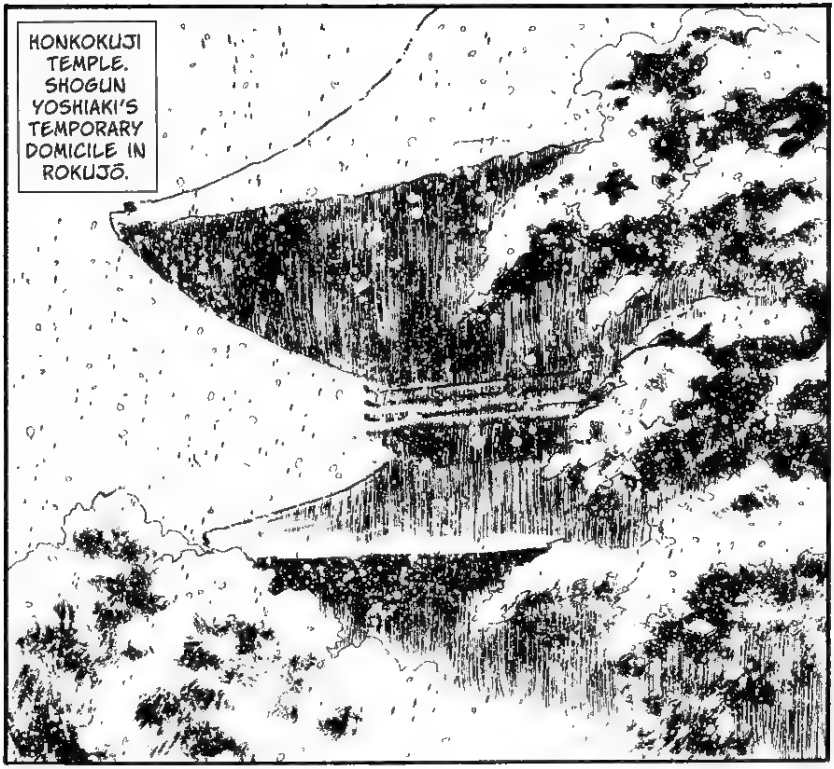
THE MIYOSHI FACTION WILL MARCH ON THE CAPITAL IMMEDIATELY AND BEHEAD THE SHOGUN YOSHIAKI!
CERTAINLY. MY *YABUMI* WAS TO SPARK A SIGNAL FIRE. IT SHOULD BE DELIVERED TODAY.
YOU, THE MIYOSHI *SANNINSHŪ*'S *SUPPA*. I AM NOW BACK IN GIFU CASTLE AND APPEAR TO BE SPENDING THE NEW YEAR'S IN LEISURE. IS THAT WHAT YOU REPORTED?
I RETURNED TO GIFU FOR THIS TO HAPPEN. DELIBERATELY!!
IT'S TOO LATE NOW.

HA HA
HA HA HA
HA HA
HA HA.
COLIC, INDEED!
BYON
WSSH
THOP

きえ
AAHHH!!!
JUST AS WE PLANNED!
WE'LL RACE BACK TO KYOTO!

KRAPT
KRAPT
KRAPT
KRAPT




HONKOKUJI TEMPLE. SHOGUN YOSHIAKI'S TEMPORARY DOMICILE IN ROKUJŌ.

I DON'T GET IT!
WHY DID NOBUNAGA-DONO RETURN TO GIFU?!
I JUST DON'T GET IT!
HE WILL.
BUT WILL HE MAKE IT IN TIME?!
YOU SAID NOBUNAGA-DONO WILL COME RIGHT BACK TO THE CAPITAL THE MOMENT THE MIYOSHI SANNINSHŪ ATTACK US.

WITH THE SNOW, IT WILL BE MORE LIKE FOUR DAYS! ARE YOU SURE YOU CAN DEFEND US FROM THE MIYOSHI FACTION WITH THE FEW MEN YOU'VE KEPT?
IT TAKES AT LEAST THREE DAYS TO GET HERE.
NOBUNAGA-SAMA WILL BE HERE BEFORE THEN.
TH... THEN... WE'LL BE DESTROYED!
WE'LL HOLD OUT FOR TWO DAYS.
WHAT ABOUT THE EXTRA TWO DAYS?!
IN ANY CASE, NOBUNAGA-SAMA HAS RETURNED TO GIFU ONLY TO DRAW THE MIYOSHI FACTION INTO THE CAPITAL. PLEASE SET YOUR MIND AT REST.
FROM WHAT KINOSHITA-DONO TELLS ME, THEY HAVE SPARE HORSES WAITING ALONG THE WAY.

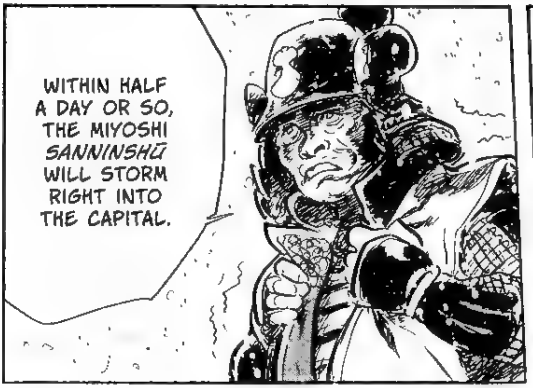
THAT'S WHY I DON'T UNDERSTAND HIS PLAN!
THAT MAY BE SO, BUT I AM HERE! IN A WAY, I'M JUST A DECOY.
HOW CAN HE EVEN THINK OF SUBJECTING THE CAPITAL TO THE FIRE OF WAR AGAIN?!
WHETHER I LIVE OR DIE, IT'S OBVIOUS THAT NOBUNAGA-*DONO* DOESN'T CARE. NOT THE SLIGHTEST.
YOUR HIGHNESS, YOU GO TOO FAR!
DEFENDING ME AND MARCHING THE ARMY FROM KYOTO TO DESTROY THE MIYOSHI FACTION. THAT WOULD'VE BEEN THE EXPECTED COURSE OF ACTION!
EVEN YOU TREAT ME WITH CONTEMPT NOW.
SHUT UP, FUJITAKA!

SO I DO NOT UNDER-STAND!
AND THAT'S WHAT MAKES ME SAD. AND SCORNFUL!
SIMPLY PUT, THIS PLAN WAS DEVISED ONLY BY IGNORING MY EXISTENCE. THAT'S ALL.
ONCE BURNT TO ASHES, WE CAN BUILD EVERYTHING ANEW, INCLUDING YOUR MAJESTY'S IMPERIAL PALACE.
WE WANT THE MIYOSHI FACTION TO STRIKE THE CAPITAL FOR A REASON.
YOUR MAJESTY, YOU WORRY GROUNDLESSLY. LET ME EXPLAIN THE TRUE INTENT BEHIND THIS.
AND WE'LL BUILD A WONDERFUL AND DIVINE IMPERIAL PALACE.
WE'LL SUMMON MEN AND GATHER MATERIALS NOT ONLY FROM AROUND KYOTO BUT ALSO FROM OWARI, MINŌ, ŌMI, ISE, MIKAWA, AND THE FIVE PROVINCES OF *KINAI*, WAKASA, TANGO, TANBA, AND HARIMA.

B... BUT...
THAT'S ONLY IF WE BEAT THE MIYOSHI FACTION!
BECAUSE ONLY THEN CAN WE STABILIZE THE PUBLIC, AND KYOTO WILL FINALLY RECOVER FROM THE FIRE OF WAR.
PLEASE BE CALM. WITHOUT YOUR HIGHNESS, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO BUILD THE IMPERIAL PALACE AND SETTLE PUBLIC SENTIMENT.
IT WILL TAKE MORE THAN TWO DAYS BEFORE NOBUNAGA-*DONO* HEARS FROM US!
YOU SAID NOBUNAGA-*DONO* WOULD GET HERE IN TWO DAYS. BUT HOW IS HE GOING TO KNOW ABOUT THEIR ATTACK?!
I HAVE A REPORT, SIR! THE MIYOSHI *SANNINSHŪ* HAVE TAKEN UP ARMS! THEY'VE MARSHALED MORE THAN TEN THOUSAND MEN, AND THEY'RE NOW APPROACHING THE CAPITAL!
THEREFORE, MILORD WILL ARRIVE IN TWO DAYS WITHOUT FAIL.

HOSOKAWA-DONO, PLEASE EVACUATE, PROTECTING HIS HIGHNESS.
AKECHI-DONO, PLEASE TAKE POSITION AT KATSURA RIVER AS PLANNED.
ALL RIGHT. I'M READY.
AND I'LL STAY PUT RIGHT HERE.
CERTAINLY, SIR.

YOUR MAJESTY, IF MILORD IS LATE EVEN BY HALF A DAY...
THIS WILL BE ME-- DEAD.


WITHIN HALF A DAY OR SO, THE MIYOSHI *SANNINSHŪ* WILL STORM RIGHT INTO THE CAPITAL.

IT'S FREEZING COLD, WHETHER DEFENDING OR ATTACKING.

NOW... IF NOBUNAGA *SAMA* DOESN'T MAKE IT HERE BY TOMORROW MORNING... I GUESS I WILL BE DEAD TOO.
THE SNOW FALLS THICK AND HEAVY, NOT KNOWING IT WILL BE SOAKED IN BLOOD.

OH WELL. I'M SURE WE'LL BE FINE. THERE'S NO WAY WE'LL LOSE A BATTLE WE PROVOKED.
TOK TOK TOK
THE MIYOSHI SANNINSHŪ MAY HAVE ASSEMBLED A HODGEPODGE OF RŌNIN FROM THE SOUTH, BUT STILL, THEIR FORCE IS TWICE AS STRONG AS OURS. EVEN IF WE HOLD OUT TO OUR VERY LIMIT, WE'LL BARELY LAST UNTIL NOON TOMORROW.

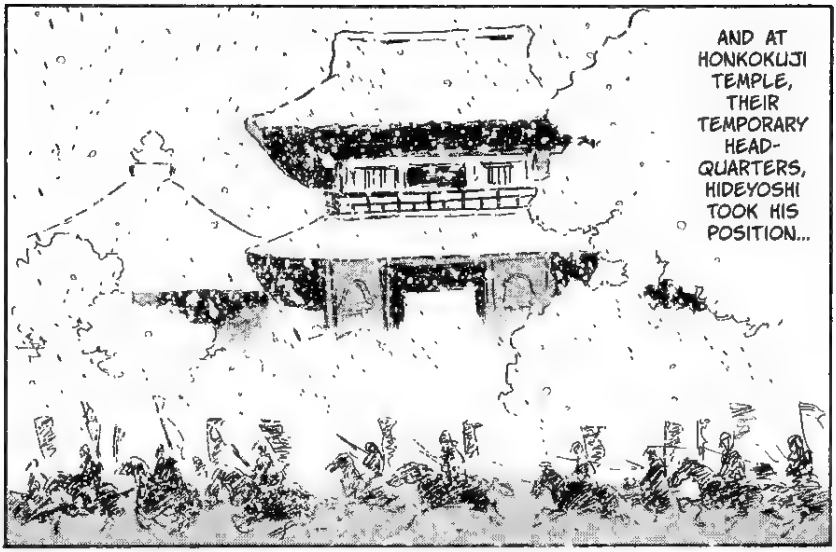
JANUARY 4TH, EIROKU
YEAR 12 (1569 A.D.)
THE MIYOSHI *SANNINSHŪ*,
I.E., IWANARI TOMOMICHI,
MIYOSHI NAGAYUKI, AND MIYOSHI MASAYASU,
TOGETHER WITH NAGAI HAYATO, ATTACKED
KYOTO WITH YAKUSHIJI KURŌZAEMON
HEADING UP THEIR ADVANCE UNIT.
THEIR ARMY WAS ABOUT
TEN THOUSAND STRONG.

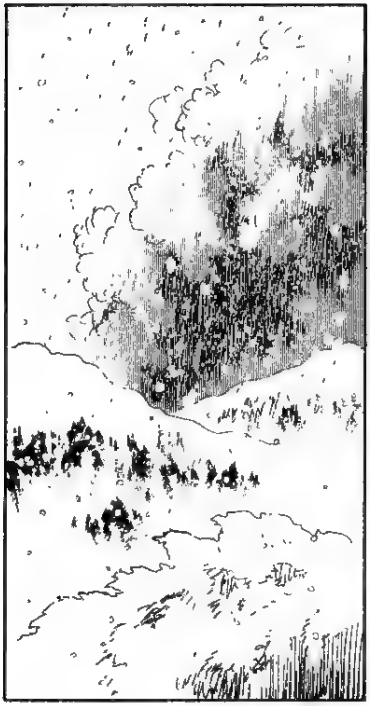
THE ODA SIDE THAT
MET THEM WERE:
ODA *SAKON-NO-SHŌGEN*,
NOMURA *ETCHŪ-NO-KAMI*,
AKAZA SHICHIRŌEMON,
AKAZA SUKEROKU, AND
TSUDA SAMANOJŌ.

TRUM
TRUM
TRUM
TRUM

TAKING UP THEIR
REAR WERE:
WATANABE
KATSUZAEMON,
SAKAI YOUEMON, AND
MORI YAGOHACHI.

AWAITING ORDERS BY THE KATSURA RIVER WAS A COMMANDO UNIT THAT INCLUDED AKECHI JŪBEI MITSUHIDE, NAITŌ *BICCHŪ-NO-KAMI*, YAMAGATA GENNAI, AND UNO YASHICHI.


AND AT HONKOKUJI TEMPLE, THEIR TEMPORARY HEAD-QUARTERS, HIDEYOSHI TOOK HIS POSITION...



...WAITING FOR NOBUNAGA'S ARRIVAL.

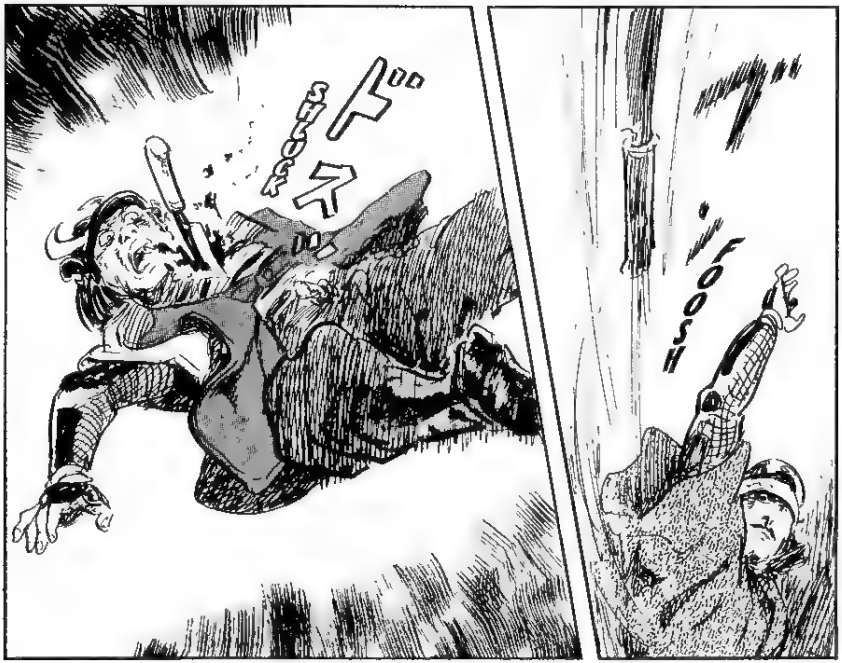
THUMP
TELL AKECHI-DONO TO MOVE FORWARD!
THE ADVANCE GUARD LED BY ODA SAKON-NO-SHŌGEN-SAMA AND AKAZA-SAMA COULD NOT HOLD OUT ANY LONGER, AND THEY'RE PULLING BACK!
YES SIR!
QUICKLY!

HYAA!!

ズバッ
GUWASHA

WE MUST HOLD OUT!!
PUSH! PUSH! DON'T PULL BACK!
WHO... WHO THE HELL IS HE?!

I BELIEVE YOU ARE THE ENEMY GENERAL, YAKUSHIJI KURŌZAEMON!
I AM AKECHI JŪBEI MITSUHIDE!


ドドド

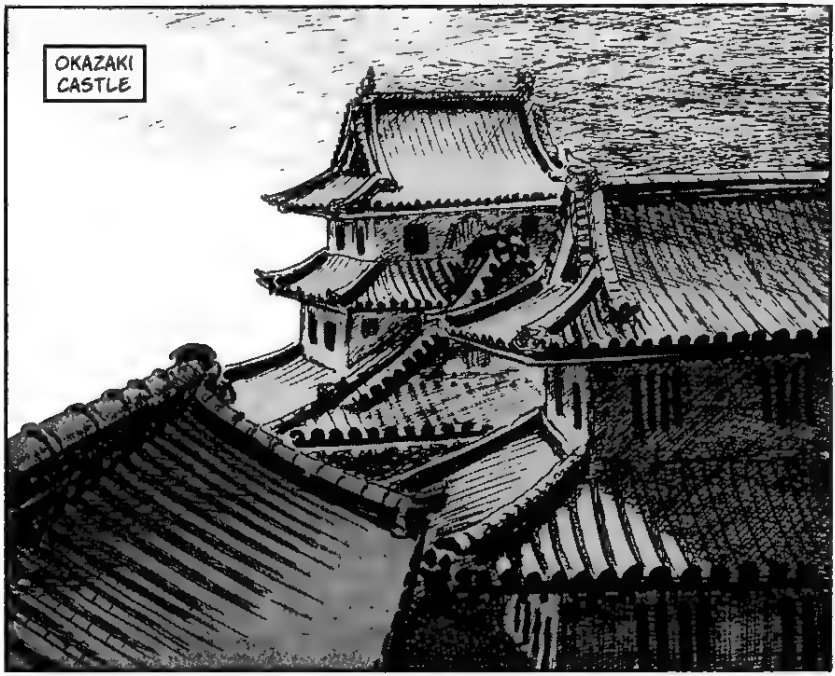
HE'S LATE!

STAND FIRM, BALDY RAT!

WA
WA
WA

MILORD HAS ARRIVED!!
THUNK
PLEASE REST EASY, HIDEYOSHI-DONO!
CHOMP
MUNCH
MUNCH!

Chapter On Tenka Fubu No. 3: Hikuma Castle


OKAZAKI
CASTLE

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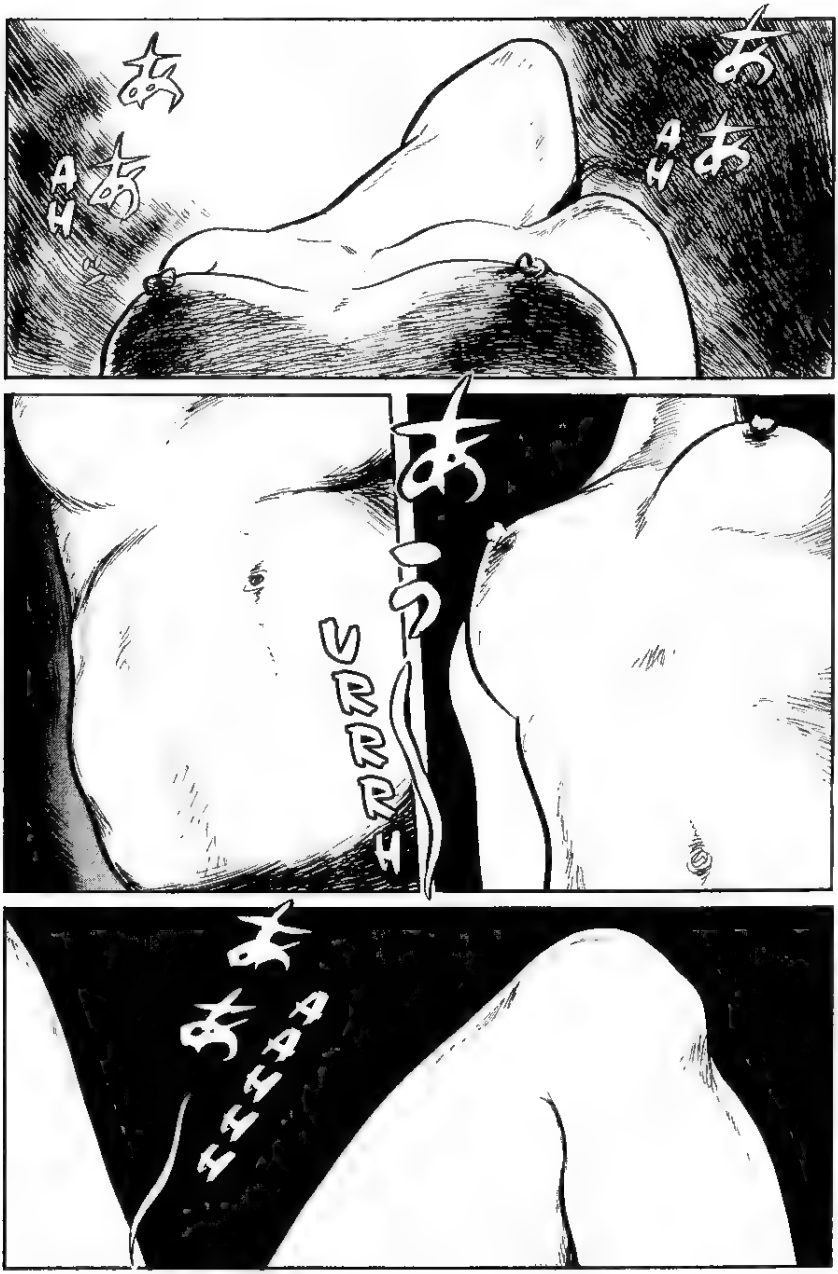
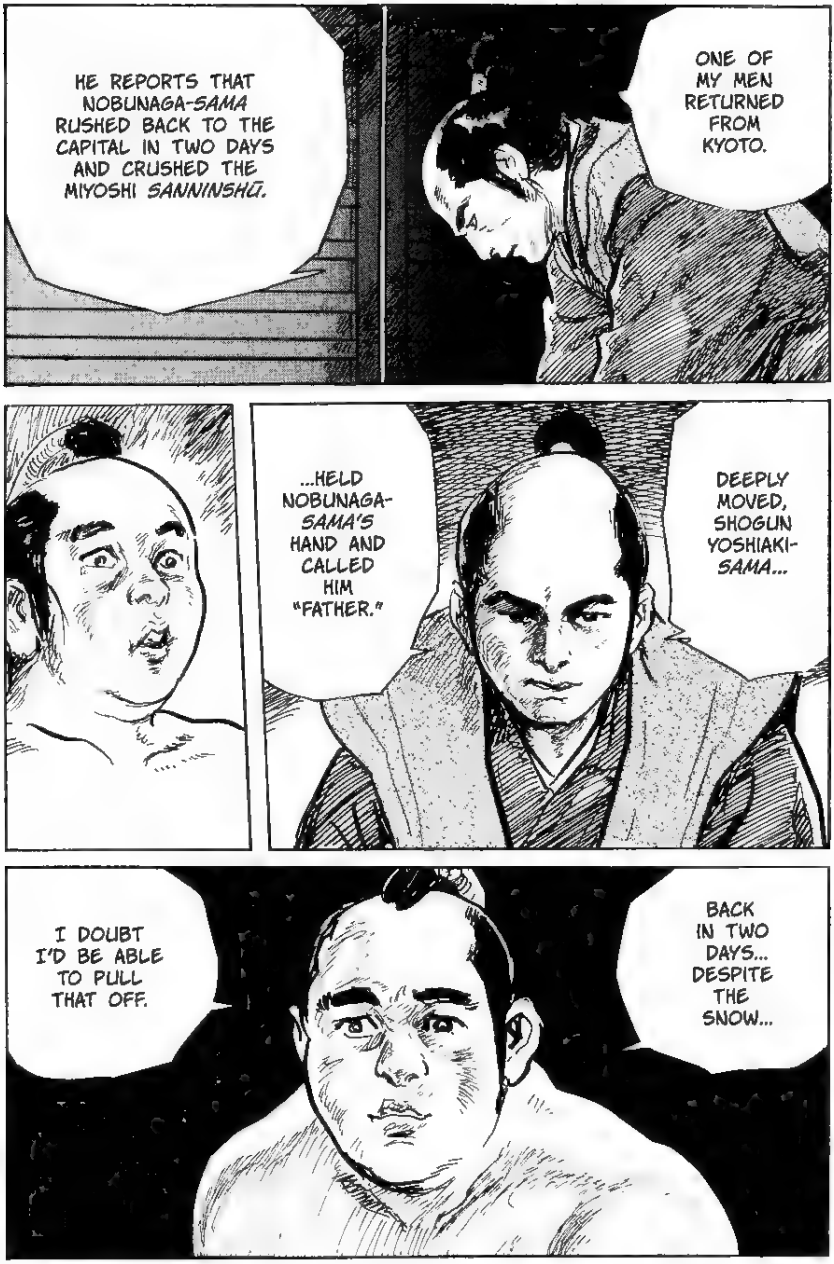
あー
AAHHH!


AH
AH
VRRRH

GOOD! IT'S GOOD!
AAHHH
THERE... RIGHT THERE!

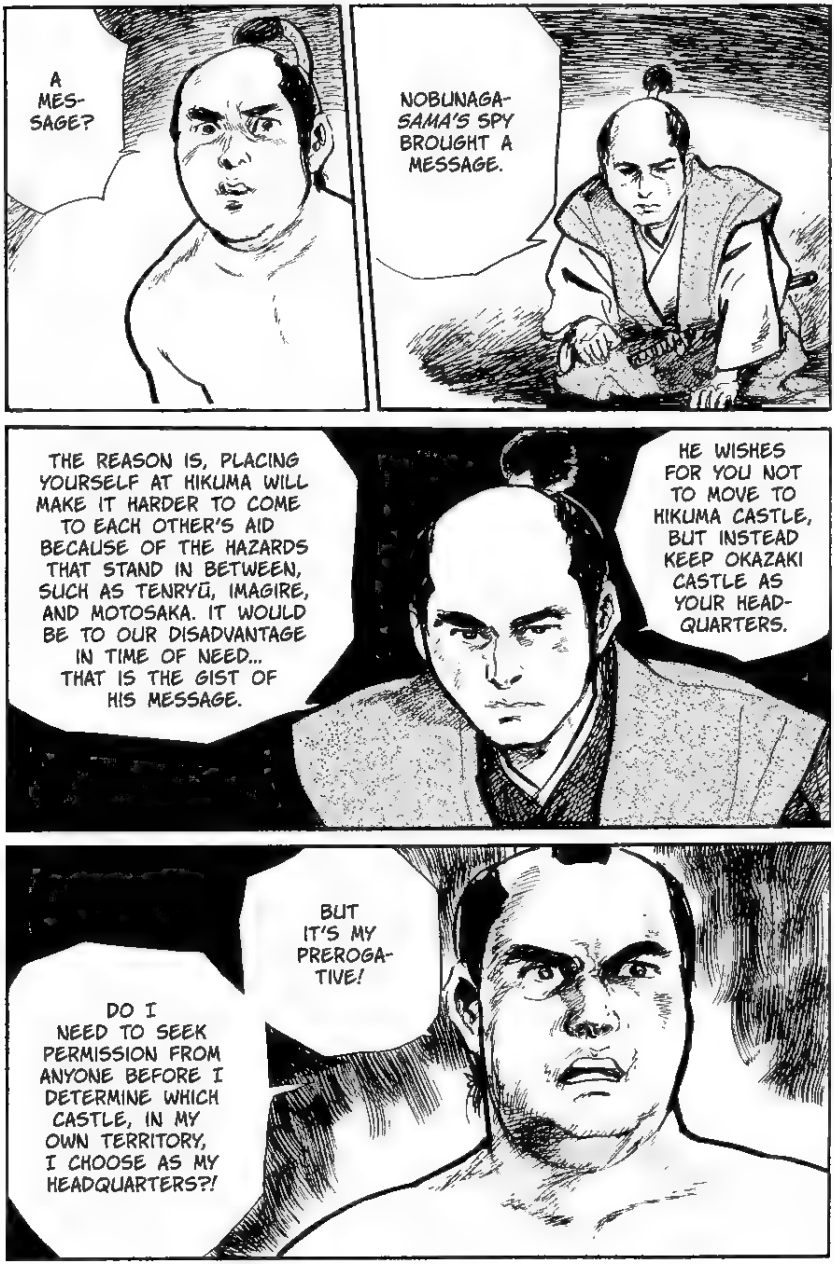
MILORD!
UR...
HANZŌ?
YES.


ONE OF MY MEN RETURNED FROM KYOTO.
HE REPORTS THAT NOBUNAGA-SAMA RUSHED BACK TO THE CAPITAL IN TWO DAYS AND CRUSHED THE MIYOSHI SANNINSHŪ.
DEEPLY MOVED, SHOGUN YOSHIAKI-SAMA...
...HELD NOBUNAGA-SAMA'S HAND AND CALLED HIM "FATHER."
BACK IN TWO DAYS... DESPITE THE SNOW...
I DOUBT I'D BE ABLE TO PULL THAT OFF.

AAHHH! DARLING!
MMG...
THE SHOGUN CALLED... NOBUNAGA-*DONO* "FATHER"... INDEED...

HE MAY TURN AGAINST NOBUNAGA-DONO SOONER OR LATER.
THAT MAN YOSHIAKI. HOW FECKLESS HE IS.
AHH, DON'T STOP...
D... DON'T STOP.
WHAT?!
DISGUST-ING!
NO. I'M THINKING OF SOME-THING ELSE.
AAAHHHH!!

SIR.
HMM.
A LITTLE MORE...
RIGHT THERE...
TOCK!


A MES-SAGE?
NOBUNAGA-SAMA'S SPY BROUGHT A MESSAGE.
THE REASON IS, PLACING YOURSELF AT HIKUMA WILL MAKE IT HARDER TO COME TO EACH OTHER'S AID BECAUSE OF THE HAZARDS THAT STAND IN BETWEEN, SUCH AS TENRYŪ, IMAGIRE, AND MOTOSAKA. IT WOULD BE TO OUR DISADVANTAGE IN TIME OF NEED... THAT IS THE GIST OF HIS MESSAGE.
HE WISHES FOR YOU NOT TO MOVE TO HIKUMA CASTLE, BUT INSTEAD KEEP OKAZAKI CASTLE AS YOUR HEAD-QUARTERS.
DO I NEED TO SEEK PERMISSION FROM ANYONE BEFORE I DETERMINE WHICH CASTLE, IN MY OWN TERRITORY, I CHOOSE AS MY HEADQUARTERS?!
BUT IT'S MY PREROGA-TIVE!

あ
あ
AAHHH!
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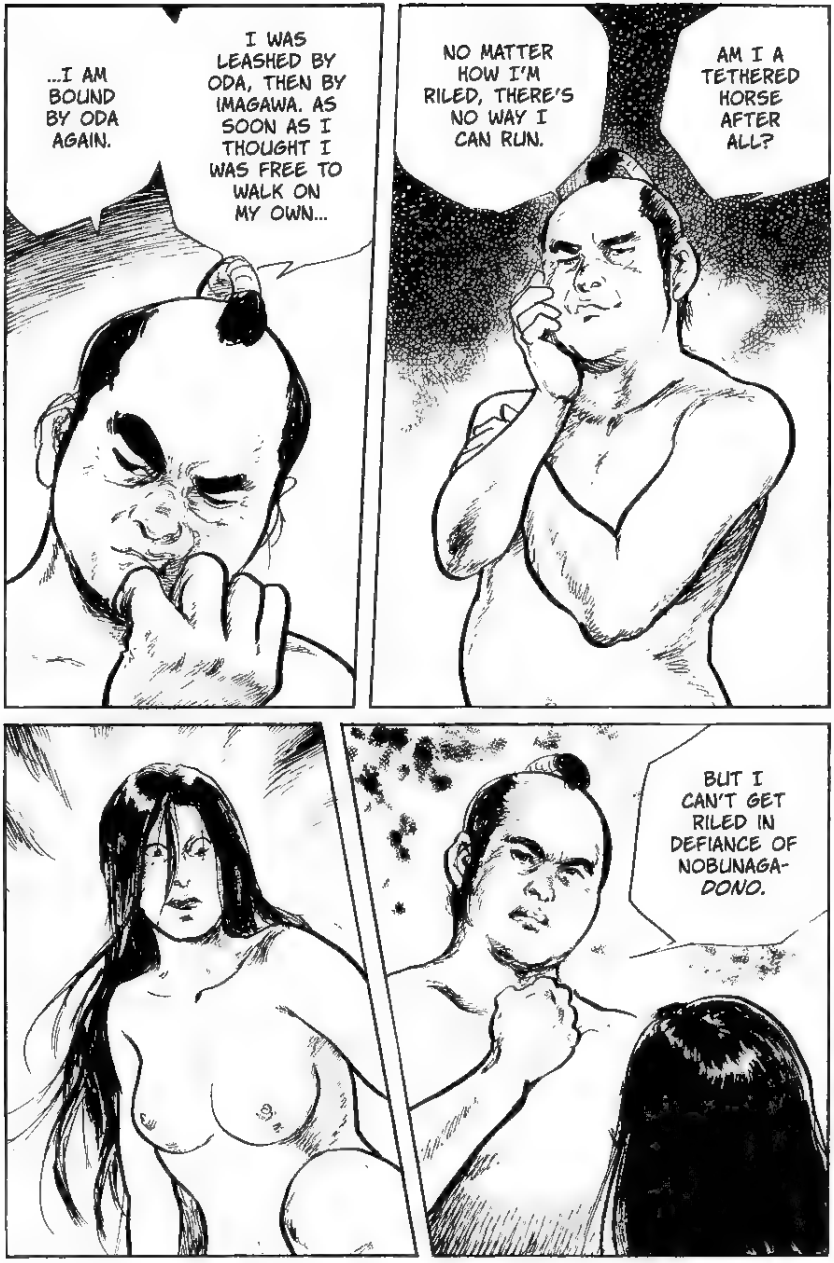
あ
DON'T...
DON'T STOP...
THIS TIME...
PLEASE.
あ
あ
AAHHH

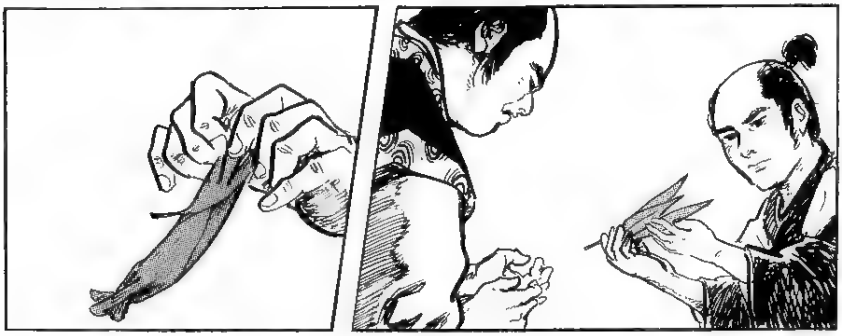

...I AM BOUND BY ODA AGAIN.
I WAS LEASHED BY ODA, THEN BY IMAGAWA. AS SOON AS I THOUGHT I WAS FREE TO WALK ON MY OWN...
NO MATTER HOW I'M RILED, THERE'S NO WAY I CAN RUN.
AM I A TETHERED HORSE AFTER ALL?
BUT I CAN'T GET RILED IN DEFIANCE OF NOBUNAGA-DONO.

I TOO VOTE AGAINST MOVING TO HIKUMA!
YOU ARE ALSO TETHERED TO ME!
AHHHH
CHOMP

あ
あ
あ
AAAAAHH

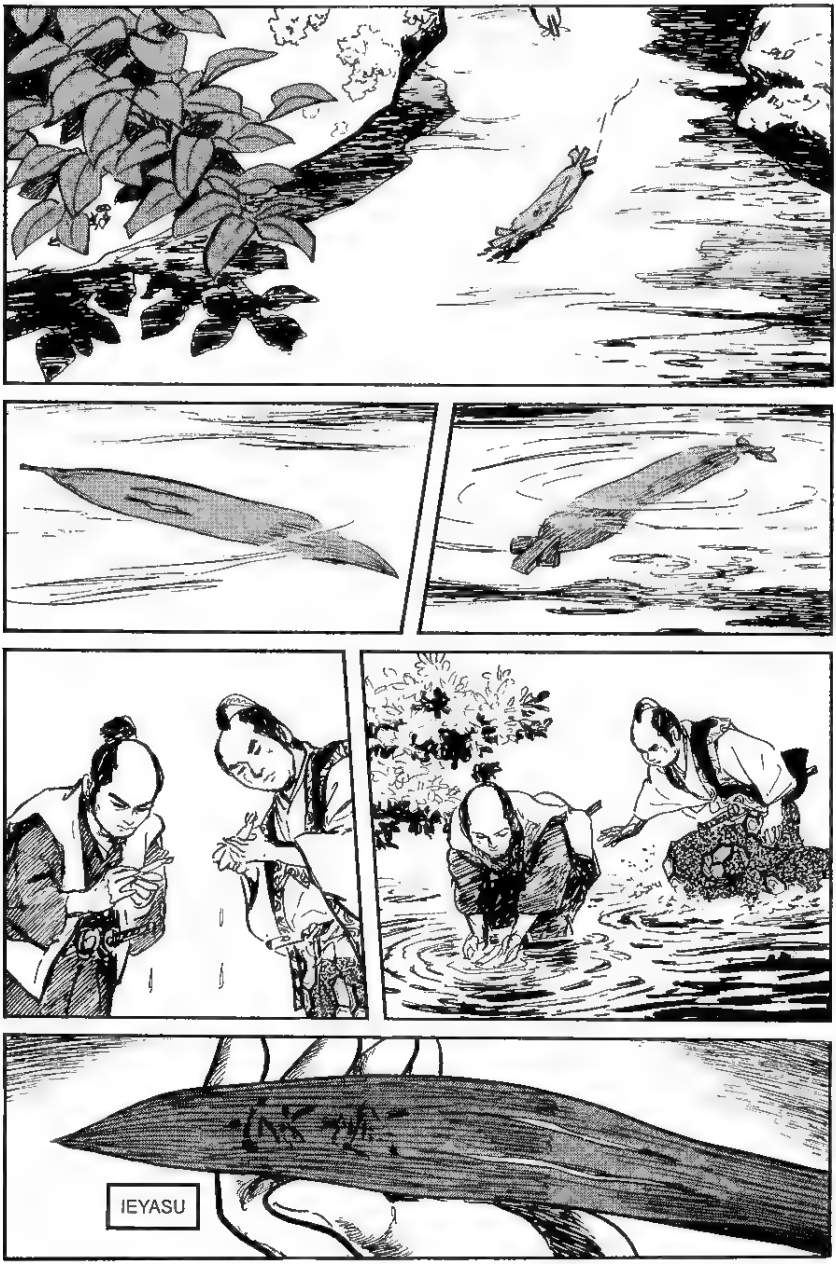
HE WILL MARCH ON THE CAPITAL FOR CERTAIN.
I WILL MOVE TO HIKUMA. I DECIDED. OTHERWISE I CAN'T FIGHT TAKEDA. SO LONG AS I LIVE I MUST FACE TAKEDA SHINGEN.
AND I WILL BE THE ONE WHO CLASHES HEAD-ON WITH HIM.
I'M SURE NOBUNAGA-*DONO* WILL UNDERSTAND. AFTER ALL, THE TETHERED HORSE IS ONLY WALKING, NOT RUNNING...
NEW YEAR'S, GENKI YEAR 1 (1570 A.D.) IEYASU MOVED HIS HEADQUARTERS TO HIKUMA CASTLE. HE RENAMED THE NEWLY FINISHED FORTRESS HAMAMATSU CASTLE.

Chapter On Tenka Fubu No. 3: Oda-Tokugawa Alliance, Part 1

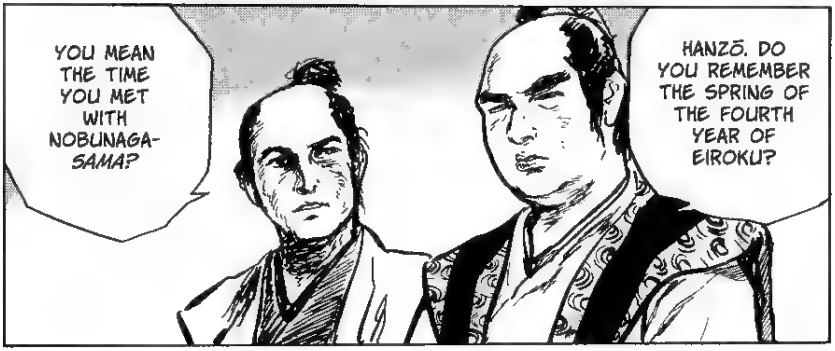


NO.
WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO MAKE ONE FOR YOU?

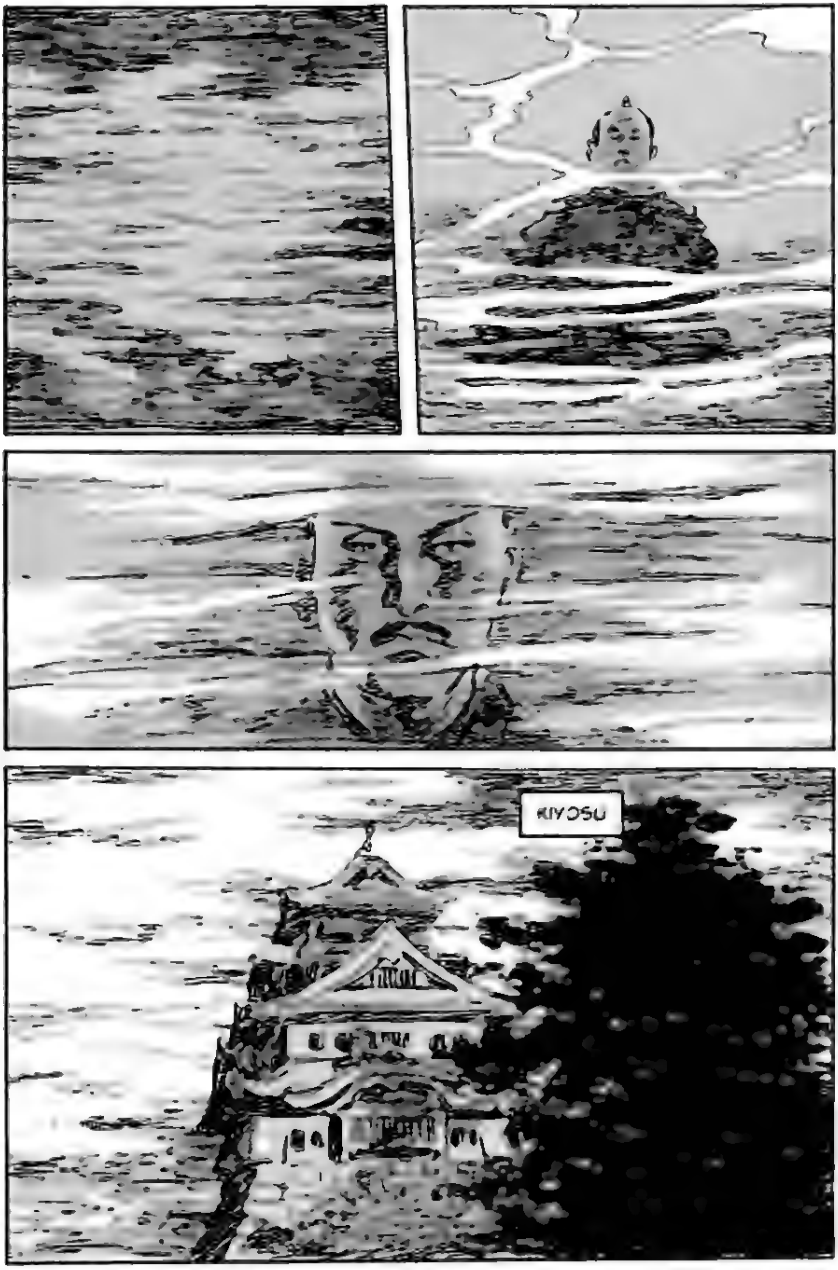
YATATE PLEASE.
NOBUNAGA
IEYASU
SHINGEN


IEYASU

THE ONE THAT WAS FLIPPED OVER WAS NOBUNAGA-SAMA'S.
THIS IS MY BOAT.
SHINGEN
THAT MEANS...


YOU MEAN THE TIME YOU MET WITH NOBUNAGA-SAMA?
HANZŌ. DO YOU REMEMBER THE SPRING OF THE FOURTH YEAR OF EIROKU?

IT WAS A YEAR AFTER I RETURNED TO THE CASTLE OF OKAZAKI. I NEVER DREAMT NOBUNAGA-SAMA WOULD INITIATE A REQUEST FOR US TO CONVENE.
AND WHAT'S MORE, IT WAS ABOUT JOINING FORCES.
UH-HUH.

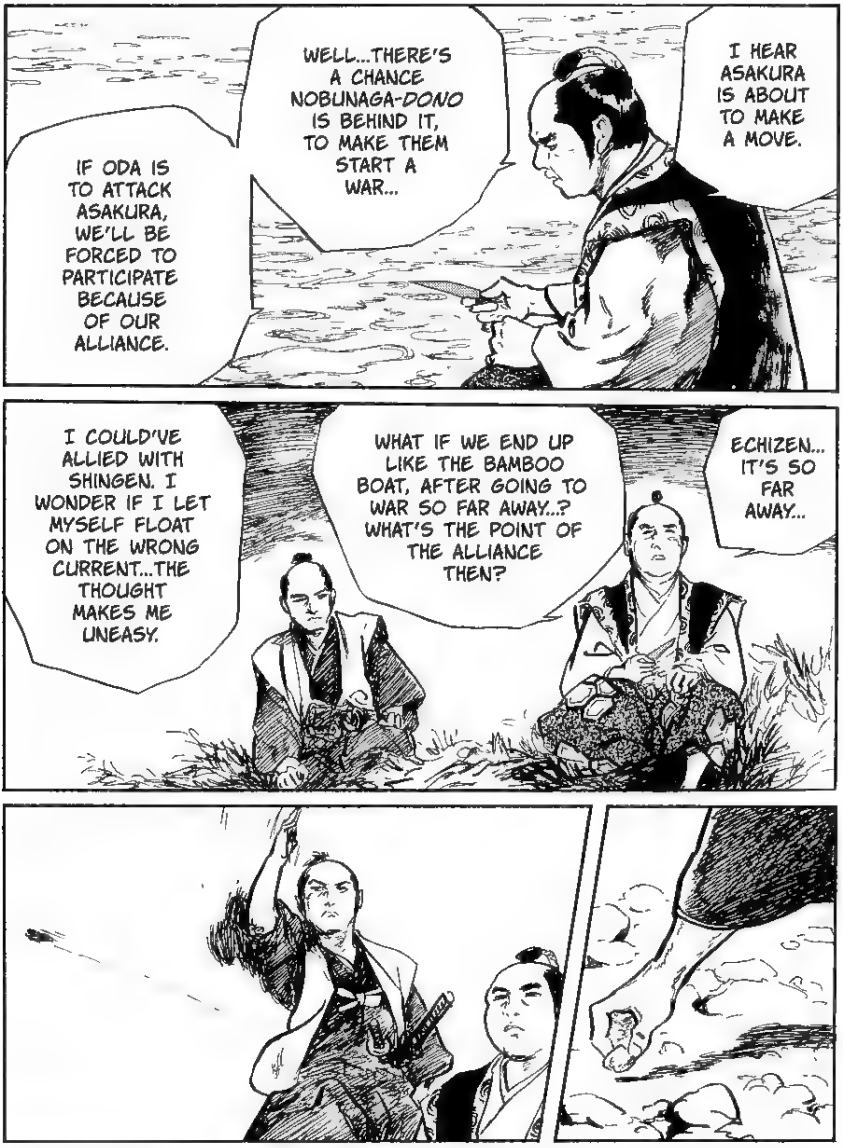

KIYOSU

YES.
WE USED TO PLAY TOGETHER IN NAGOYA. DO YOU REMEMBER THAT?
YES.
I WAS FIFTEEN, AND YOU WERE SEVEN THEN.

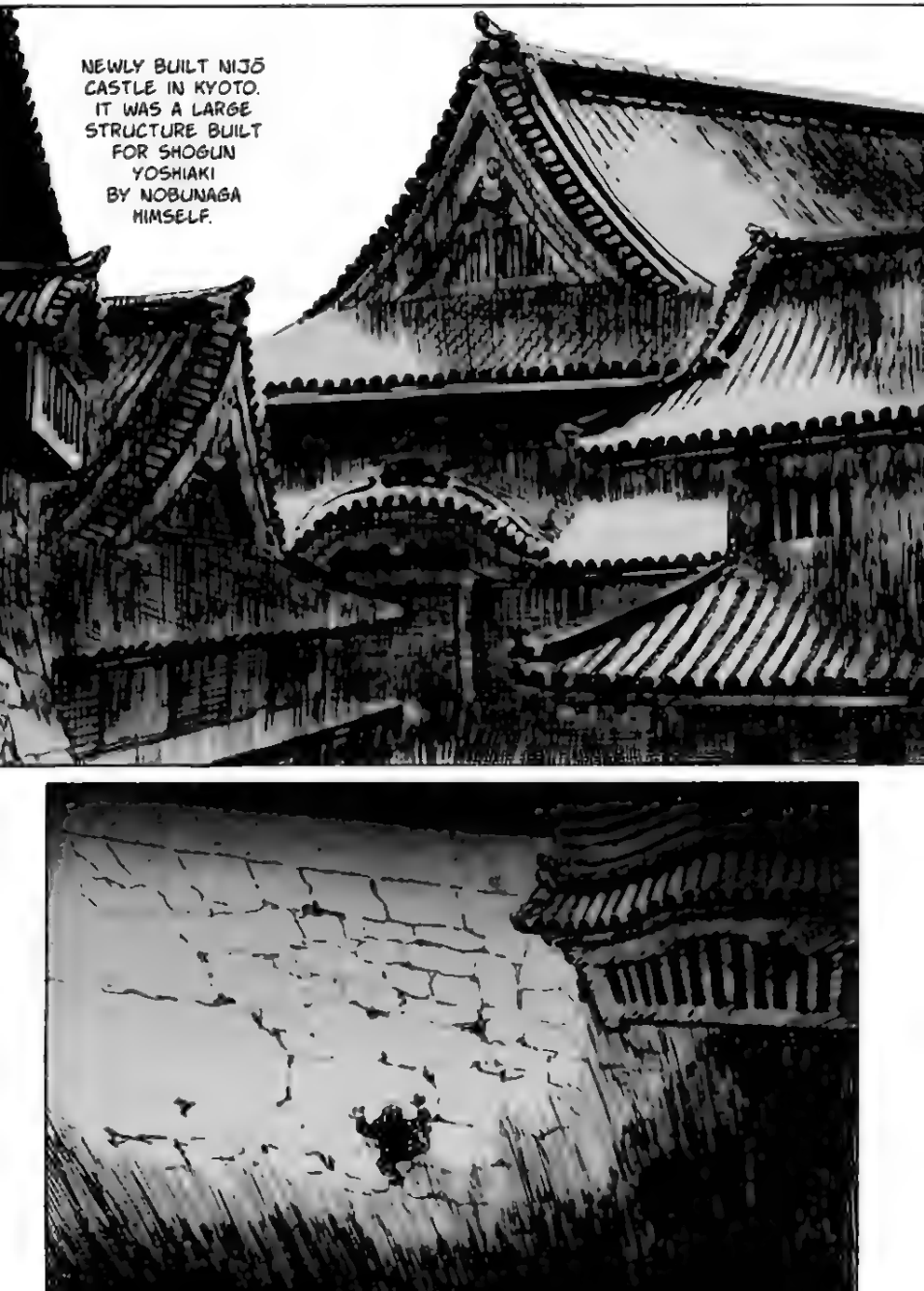
I'VE COME TO MEET YOU WITH THAT IN MIND.
SO HOW ABOUT JOINING HANDS?
MY GREATEST AMBITION IS TO MARCH ON THE WEST, WHILE YOURS IS TO CONQUER THE EAST. THERE, OUR INTERESTS MATCH UNEXPECTEDLY.
HA HA HA HA
HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA

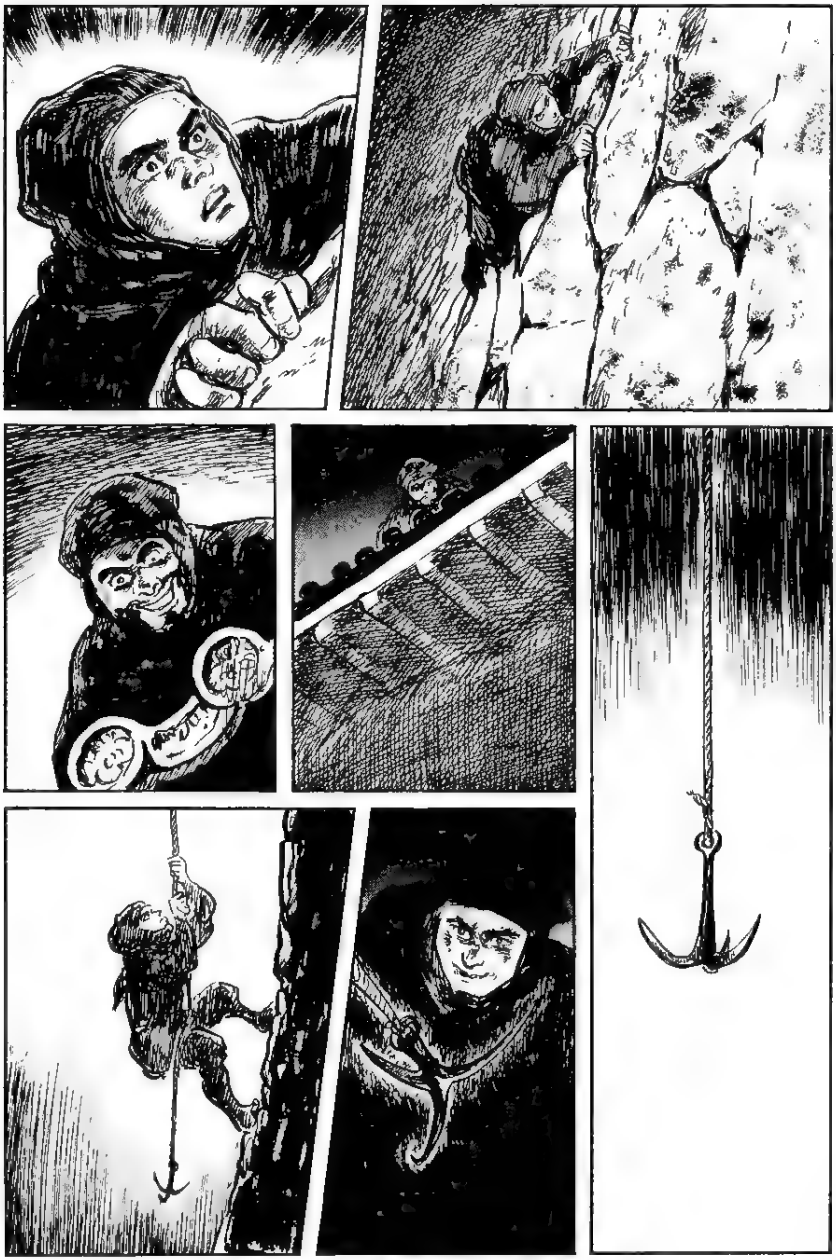
IT'S DIFFICULT TO FIGHT A TIGER, BUT IT'S NOT A PROBLEM TO FIGHT A CAT.
BUT LET ME ASK YOU THIS. WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT THE FAMILIES OF YOUR CLANSMEN WHO ARE IMAGAWA'S HOSTAGES RIGHT NOW?
I AM GLAD OF YOUR RESOLVE. I'M SURE MANY OF YOUR CLANSMEN OBJECTED TO THE IDEA.
HOWEVER, SINCE IT'S THE CAT WHO'S HOLDING THEM, I BELIEVE THERE IS A WAY BOTH TO FIGHT AND RECOVER THEM.
IF IT WAS THE TIGER WHO TOOK THE HOSTAGES, I WOULD HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO FIGHT DESPERATELY.
YOU TURNED UJIZANE INTO A CAT! HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA.
HA HA HA HA
HA HA HA HA
IT'S BETTER TO HAVE ONLY ONE WORRY RATHER THAN TWO, I BELIEVE.
EVEN IF WE FAIL TO TAKE THE HOSTAGES BACK, UNLIKE THE TIGER, THE CAT WON'T DEVOUR US, AT LEAST.

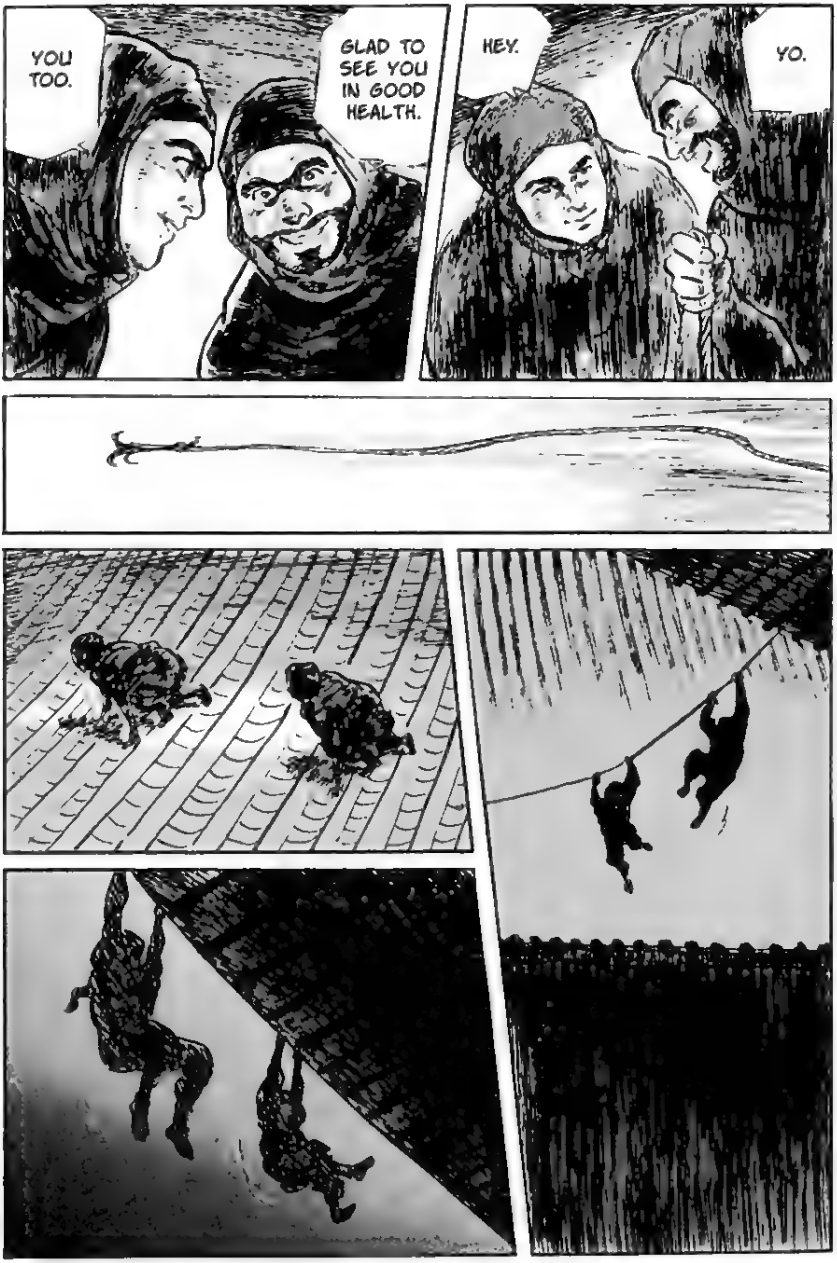
...SUB-MIT TO YOU.
WHEN YOU SUCCESSFULLY SEIZE POWER, I WILL HAPPILY...
SPEAK YOUR MIND.
I HAVE ONE CONDITION.
IF YOU CAN AGREE TO THIS, I VOW NEVER TO BETRAY YOU THE REST OF MY LIFE.
BUT IF I TAKE CONTROL OF THE COUNTRY, I WANT ODA TO COME UNDER MY WING.
HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA
GWA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA. FINE! THAT'S A PROMISE!


I HEAR ASAKURA IS ABOUT TO MAKE A MOVE.
WELL...THERE'S A CHANCE NOBUNAGA-DONO IS BEHIND IT, TO MAKE THEM START A WAR...
IF ODA IS TO ATTACK ASAKURA, WE'LL BE FORCED TO PARTICIPATE BECAUSE OF OUR ALLIANCE.
ECHIZEN... IT'S SO FAR AWAY...
WHAT IF WE END UP LIKE THE BAMBOO BOAT, AFTER GOING TO WAR SO FAR AWAY...? WHAT'S THE POINT OF THE ALLIANCE THEN?
I COULD'VE ALLIED WITH SHINGEN. I WONDER IF I LET MYSELF FLOAT ON THE WRONG CURRENT...THE THOUGHT MAKES ME UNEASY.

HM.
YOU CAN GO FAR LIKE THAT, IF YOU DON'T GO UNDER.
JUST LIKE THE PEBBLE, NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS.
I MAY SEEM TO FOUNDER, BUT NEVER SINK AT ALL...


NEWLY BUILT NIJŌ CASTLE IN KYOTO. IT WAS A LARGE STRUCTURE BUILT FOR SHOGUN YOSHIAKI BY NOBUNAGA HIMSELF.




YOU TOO.
GLAD TO SEE YOU IN GOOD HEALTH.
HEY.
YO.

TOGETHER.
YOUR PURPOSE?
MILORD ORDERED ME.
TAKENAKA-SAMA ORDERED ME HERE.
AZA!!

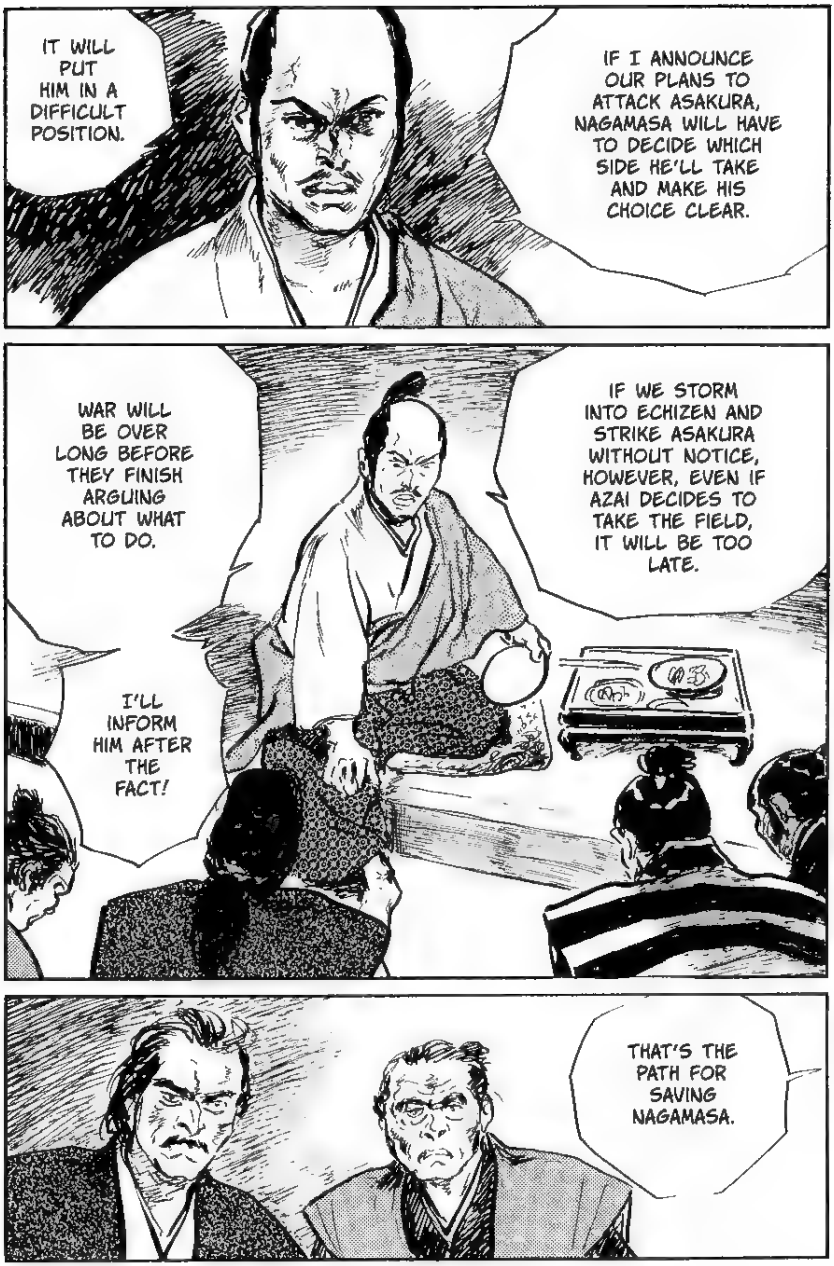
SURE.
LET'S TAKE A BREAK.
IF AZAI TAKES UP ARMS, THEY WILL STRIKE US FROM BEHIND. WE COULD BE ANNIHILATED.
IF WE ARE TO ATTACK ASAKURA, AZAI'S MOVE IS WHAT WORRIES US THE MOST.
AS EARLY AS TOMORROW, WE MAY BE GOING TO WAR AGAINST ASAKURA. BUT FROM WHAT I HEAR, NOBUNAGA-*SAMA* REFUSES TO SEND A MESSENGER TO AZAI NAGAMASA-*DONO*. IN FACT, NO NOTICE HAS BEEN GIVEN.
THAT'S THE POINT.

JUST THE OTHER DAY...
NOBUNAGA-SAMA IS ABSOLUTELY CONVINCED THAT AZAI WON'T TURN AGAINST HIM. WE HAVE A VERY TROUBLESOME SITUATION HERE.
THAT'S THE VERY REASON WHY BOTH HIDEYOSHI-SAMA AND TAKENAKA-SAMA ARE NERVOUS.
YOU KNOW THAT AZAI NAGAMASA-DONO IS THE HUSBAND OF NOBUNAGA-SAMA'S SISTER, OICHI-NO-KATA-SAMA.
YOU, BALDY RAT!!
POW

NO...NO, NEVER, SIR.
DO YOU THINK NAGAMASA IS THAT KIND OF MAN?!
WHAAT!
IT'S HIS FATHER, HISAMASA-SAMA, WHOM I DON'T TRUST.
I AM NOT DOUBTING NAGAMASA-SAMA!
ENOUGH!
AND SINCE I HEAR NAGAMASA-SAMA IS A DUTIFUL SON...
HISAMASA-SAMA AND ASAKURA HAVE A LONG-STANDING FRIENDSHIP THAT IS UNSEVERABLE.

PLEASE, MILORD.
DO YOU THINK NAGAMASA ISN'T SENSIBLE ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT?!
CONTROLLING HISAMASA IS WHAT A TRULY DUTIFUL SON WILL DO!
I STILL THINK YOU SHOULD NOTIFY NAGAMASA-*SAMA* BEFORE WE ATTACK ASAKURA.
KRAM

IF YOU NOTIFY HIM, IT WILL STIR UP WAVES WITHIN THE AZAI CLAN. THEY'LL PROBABLY ARGUE WHETHER OR NOT THEY SHOULD SIDE WITH ASAKURA OR TAKE A WAIT-AND-SEE POSITION. THAT WAY, WE WILL BE ABLE TO FEEL OUT WHAT COURSE OF ACTION AZAI MAY TAKE.
I DIDN'T NOTIFY NAGAMASA OUT OF CONSIDERATION FOR THE POSITION HE IS IN!
ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!
YOU IDIOT!
CRACK


IT WILL PUT HIM IN A DIFFICULT POSITION.
IF I ANNOUNCE OUR PLANS TO ATTACK ASAKURA, NAGAMASA WILL HAVE TO DECIDE WHICH SIDE HE'LL TAKE AND MAKE HIS CHOICE CLEAR.
WAR WILL BE OVER LONG BEFORE THEY FINISH ARGUING ABOUT WHAT TO DO.
IF WE STORM INTO ECHIZEN AND STRIKE ASAKURA WITHOUT NOTICE, HOWEVER, EVEN IF AZAI DECIDES TO TAKE THE FIELD, IT WILL BE TOO LATE.
I'LL INFORM HIM AFTER THE FACT!
THAT'S THE PATH FOR SAVING NAGAMASA.

OICHI COULD NOT HAVE HAD A BETTER MAN AS HER HUSBAND!
I BELIEVE IN HIM--IN NAGAMASA!
THAT'S HOW IT WENT.
A MAN WHO STANDS SO HIGH IN NOBUNAGA-*DONO'S* EYES MUST BE TRULY LOYAL AND DUTIFUL TO HIS FATHER, I SAY.
THAT'S WHAT HIDEYOSHI-*SAMA* AND TAKENAKA-*SAMA* ARE ANXIOUS ABOUT.
INDEED! BECAUSE HE IS AN HONORABLE MAN, HE MIGHT SIDE WITH ASAKURA, WITH WHOM HE HAD A CLOSE FRIENDSHIP BEFORE HE ESTABLISHED ANY RELATIONSHIP WITH ODA.
AND THAT'S WHY THEY SENT ME HERE TO SEE IF WE COULD FIGURE THINGS OUT THROUGH SHOGUN YOSHIAKI'S ACTIONS.

THIS IS A DIFFERENT KIND OF WAR. WE MUST FIGHT FAR FROM HOME.
TO RETURN ALIVE...
I'M IMPRESSED. THAT IS IEYASU-SAMA INDEED.
SAME HERE. MILORD SAID THE SAME.
...WE'RE DESPERATE, AREN'T WE.

NOBUNAGA BUILT ME THIS CASTLE, TOO. HE INSTALLED ME AS SHOGUN AND ALLOWS ME TO LIVE MOST COMFORTABLY.

THE BETTER HE TREATS ME, THE MORE IT BECOMES APPARENT.
HA HA HA HA HA. EVERYTHING COMES FROM HIM. EVEN THOUGH I'M THE SHOGUN!
IN SHORT, I'M HIS PUPPET.
AH!
IN OTHER WORDS, THE MAN WHO CARRIES ME IS THE MAN WHO RULES THE NATION.
ASAKURA, TOO, WANTS TO HOLD ME UP. THAT'S WHY I SENT THEM A LETTER URGING THEM TO DESTROY NOBUNAGA. HA HA HA HA HA.

WHILE THEY KEEP ON FIGHTING THE SAME OLD FIGHT, I WILL GAIN TRUE POWER. AND THE DAY WHEN I COMMAND THE NATION AS THE TRUE SHOGUN WILL BE NEARER.
WHEN THE CONFLICT ERUPTS OVER WHO WILL USE ME, I SHALL BE A PUPPET NO MORE, BUT A TRUE SHOGUN. HA HA HA HA HA.

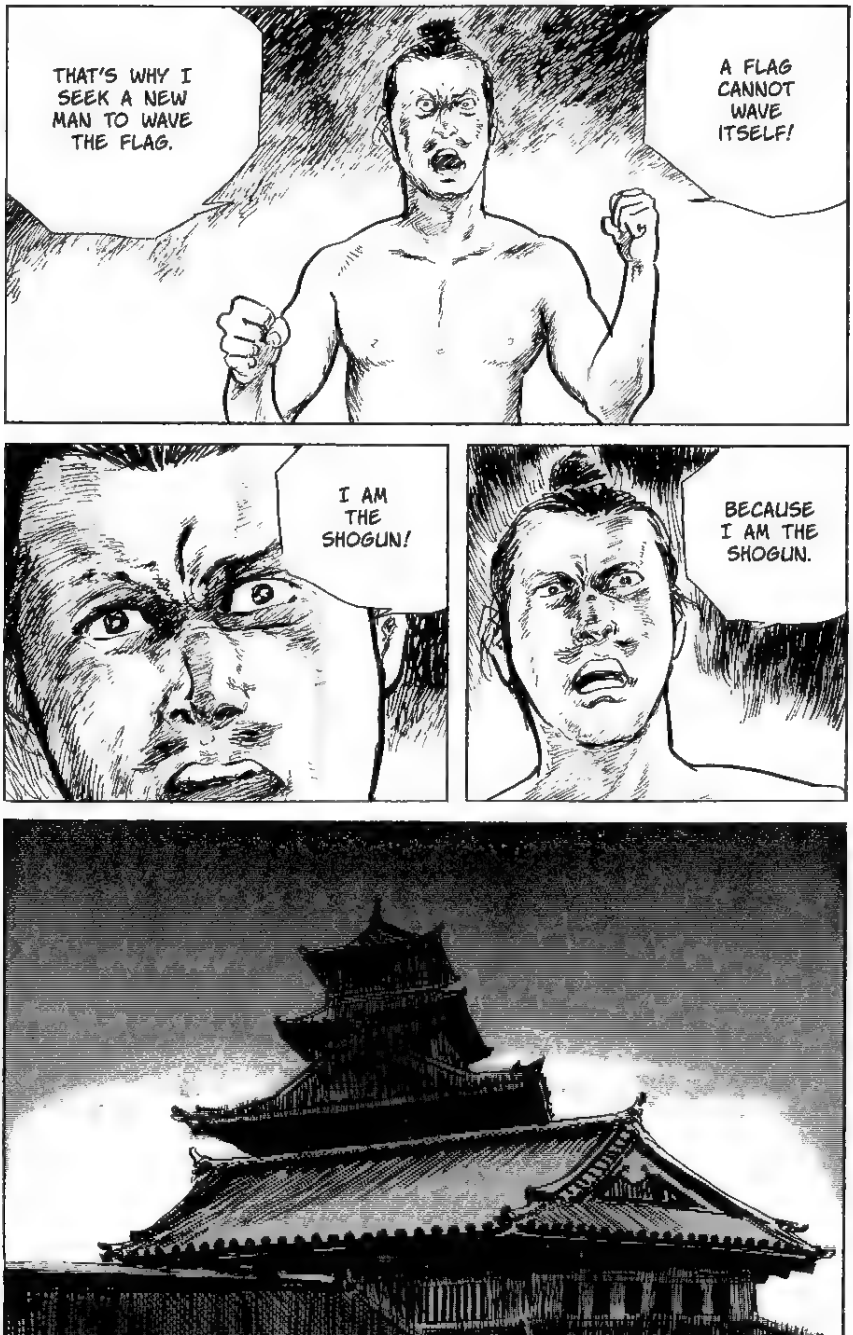
THEY SAY THAT WHEN A DOG PRETENDS TO BARK, ITS PACK WILL BARK FOR REAL.
WHEN I BECAME SHOGUN AFTER I QUIT THE PRIESTHOOD AND RENOUNCED THE CLOTH, I HAD MY OWN IDEALS AND ASPIRATIONS.

AS THE FIFTEENTH ASHIKAGA SHOGUN, I HAD AMBITIONS, TOO.
EVEN THOUGH IT WAS NOBUNAGA WHO BACKED ME, I THOUGHT I COULD UNITE THE NATION, BUILD A PEACEFUL COUNTRY AND GOVERN WISELY.
I CONSIDERED MYSELF IRREPLACE-ABLE BECAUSE THERE COULD BE NONE LIKE ME.
IN A SENSE...
SO EVEN IF I PRETENDED TO BARK, I BELIEVED DOGS LIKE...
...NOBUNAGA, MITSUHIDE, HIDEYOSHI, AND FUJITAKA WOULD BARK FOR REAL.

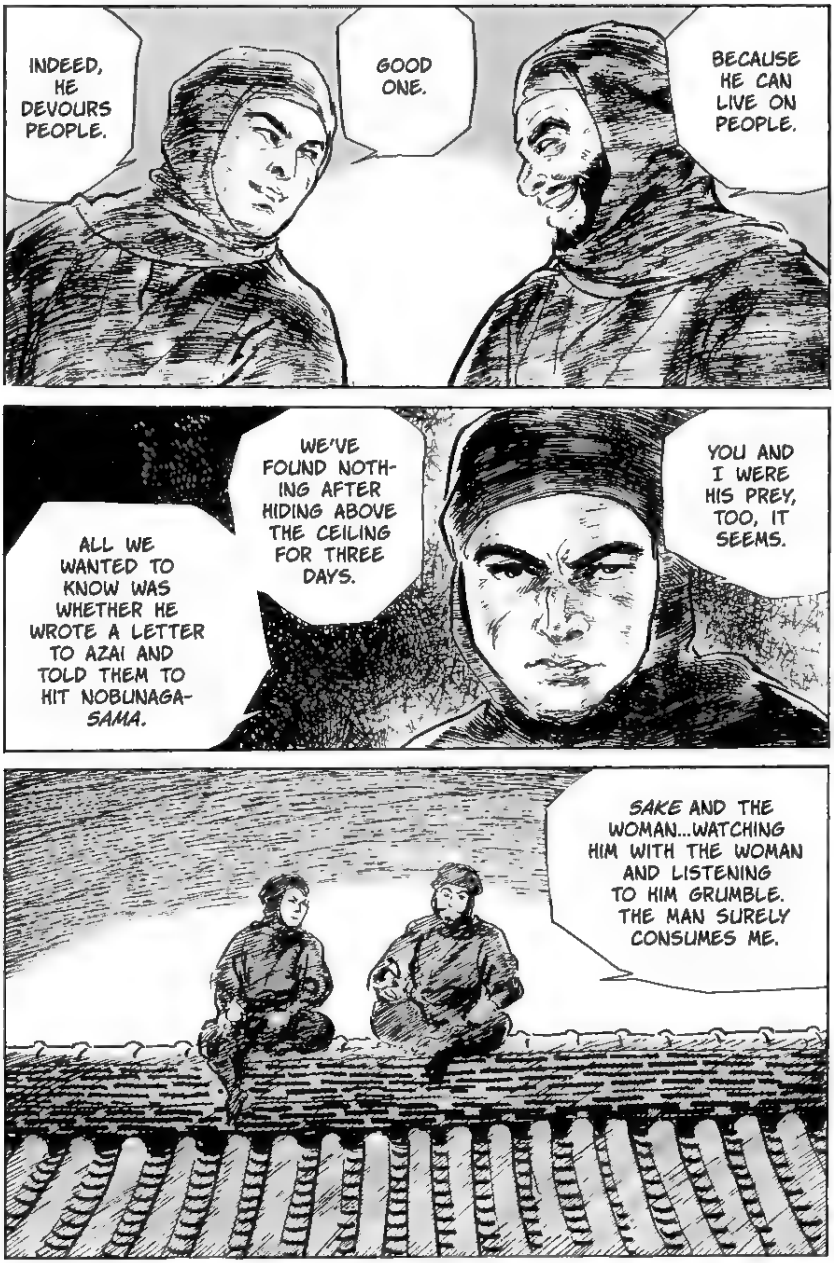
BUT WHEN MIYOSHI SANNINSHŪ STORMED INTO THE CAPITAL... FOR THAT WAR, NOBUNAGA USED ME AS A DECOY.
I KNEW THEN THAT I WASN'T A DOG, BUT A FLAG.

NOBUNAGA WAS THE DOG

BUT AS A FLAG, WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?
A PRIEST SPENDS HIS LIFE SERVING BUDDHA AND CHANTING SUTRA.
IS THAT THE JOB OF THE SHOGUN?
DOING NOTHING, DRINKING SAKE, AND SLEEPING WITH A WOMAN.
KRAK


THAT'S WHY I SEEK A NEW MAN TO WAVE THE FLAG.
A FLAG CANNOT WAVE ITSELF!
I AM THE SHOGUN!
BECAUSE I AM THE SHOGUN.

うぉー
THAT'S WHY HE WANTS TO PLACE HIMSELF ALWAYS IN THE CENTER OF CONFLICT. I CAN UNDERSTAND THAT.
HE FEELS A VOID.
WHEN A DOG PRETENDS TO BARK, ITS PACK WILL BARK FOR REAL, INDEED.
MEANING?
SOMEONE SAID THAT A SHOGUN IS A MAN WHO CAN LIVE WITHOUT FOOD.
IT'S PROBABLY THE ONLY TIME HE FEELS HE IS THE SHOGUN.


INDEED, HE DEVOURS PEOPLE.
GOOD ONE.
BECAUSE HE CAN LIVE ON PEOPLE.
ALL WE WANTED TO KNOW WAS WHETHER HE WROTE A LETTER TO AZAI AND TOLD THEM TO HIT NOBUNAGA-SAMA.
WE'VE FOUND NOTHING AFTER HIDING ABOVE THE CEILING FOR THREE DAYS.
YOU AND I WERE HIS PREY, TOO, IT SEEMS.
SAKE AND THE WOMAN...WATCHING HIM WITH THE WOMAN AND LISTENING TO HIM GRUMBLE. THE MAN SURELY CONSUMES ME.

FWP
FWP
FWP
ズテーン!
BWAMM

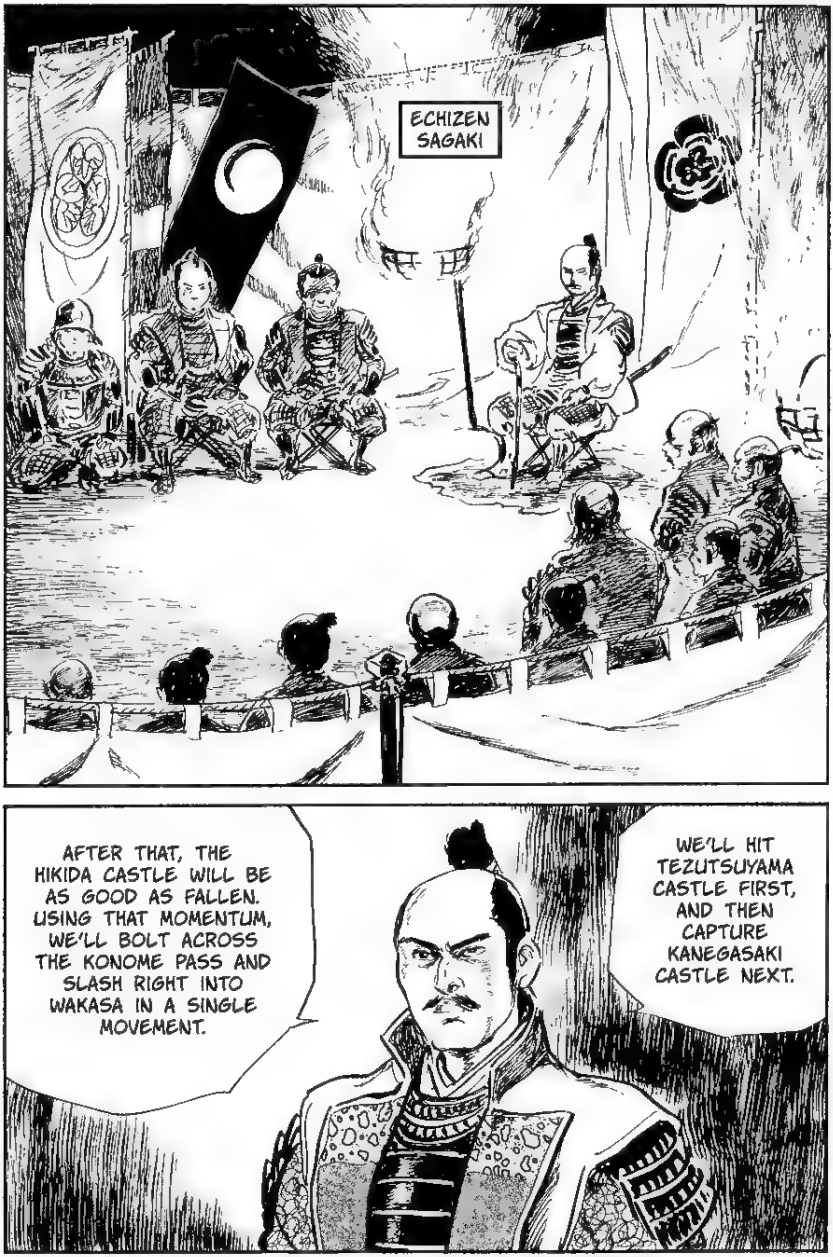
APRIL, GENKI YEAR 1 (1570 A.D.) UPON NOBUNAGA'S INVITATION, IEYASU LEFT HAMAMATSU ON MARCH 7TH AND CAME TO JOIN HIM AT JŌRAKUJI TEMPLE IN GŌSHŪ.
HA HA HA HA
HA HA HA HA
HO HOH! THAT SOUNDS FUN. DO IT! LET'S SEE IT!
IEYASU-SAMA.
WILL YOU HAVE A GAME WITH ME?

YOU NEVER KNOW HOW AZAI WILL REACT.
WE MUST SET OUT THEN.
THE SNOW ON THE HOKURIKUDŌ IS MELTING.
A GREAT DEAL MORE, INDEED.
IT'S TOUGH ON AZAI, TOO.
THE ALLIANCE-- IT'S TOUGH, ISN'T IT.
UNLESS WE WERE PREPARED TO DIE FOR IT, WE COULDN'T HAVE MADE OUR ALLIANCE.

SOUNDS GOOD.
LET'S DIE TOGETHER, SHALL WE?
TMP
TMP
TMP
WE'LL STRIKE ASAKURA! TAKE THE FIELD!
HA HA HA HA
HA HA HA

APRIL 20TH, GENKI YEAR 1 (1570 A.D.) THE ODA-TOKUGAWA ALLIED FORCES STRUCK OUT ON THE WARPATH, HEADING FOR ECHIZEN.

HIS FATE IS SIMILAR TO MINE. EVEN THOUGH AN IMAGAWA WOMAN IS MY WIFE, I TURNED AGAINST IMAGAWA AND ALLIED WITH ODA. IT'S POSSIBLE FOR AZAI TO ALLY WITH ASAKURA...
AZAI NAGAMASA... WHAT WILL HE DO?
EVEN THOUGH AN ODA WOMAN IS HIS WIFE...


ECHIZEN SAGAKI
AFTER THAT, THE HIKIDA CASTLE WILL BE AS GOOD AS FALLEN. USING THAT MOMENTUM, WE'LL BOLT ACROSS THE KONOME PASS AND SLASH RIGHT INTO WAKASA IN A SINGLE MOVEMENT.
WE'LL HIT TEZUTSUYAMA CASTLE FIRST, AND THEN CAPTURE KANEGASAKI CASTLE NEXT.

CERTAINLY, SIR.
IEYASU-DONO. PLEASE INVADE TEZUTSUYAMA FROM THE SOUTH.
YOSHIKAGE! WE'LL TEACH HIM A LESSON. HA HA HA HA HA.
HA HA HA HA HA HA. THE ASAKURA FORCES WILL FALTER JUST SEEING THE SPEED AND STRENGTH OF THE ODA-TOKUGAWA ALLIED FORCES.
YES, TO FIND OUT WHAT AZAI WILL DECIDE.
DID YOU SEND HANZŌ-SA TO ŌMI?!

SIR, I WAS SAYING WE SHOULD FINISH OUR *SUMO* MATCH IN ICHIJŌGATANI ONCE WE TERMINATE YOSHIKAGE.

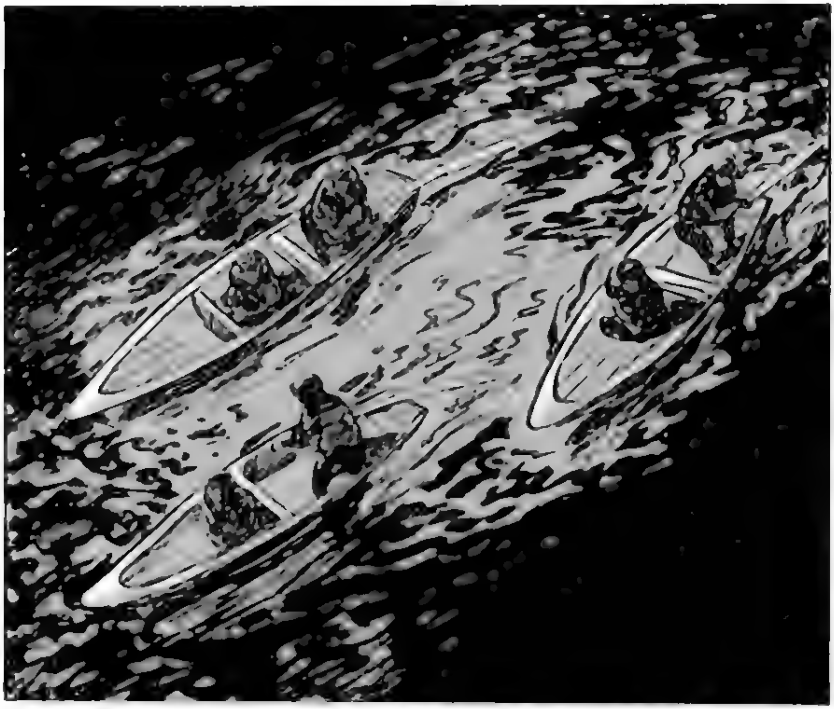
HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA

YOU AND I ARE ALLIED. KOROKU AND HANZŌ-*SA* ARE ALLIED TOO.

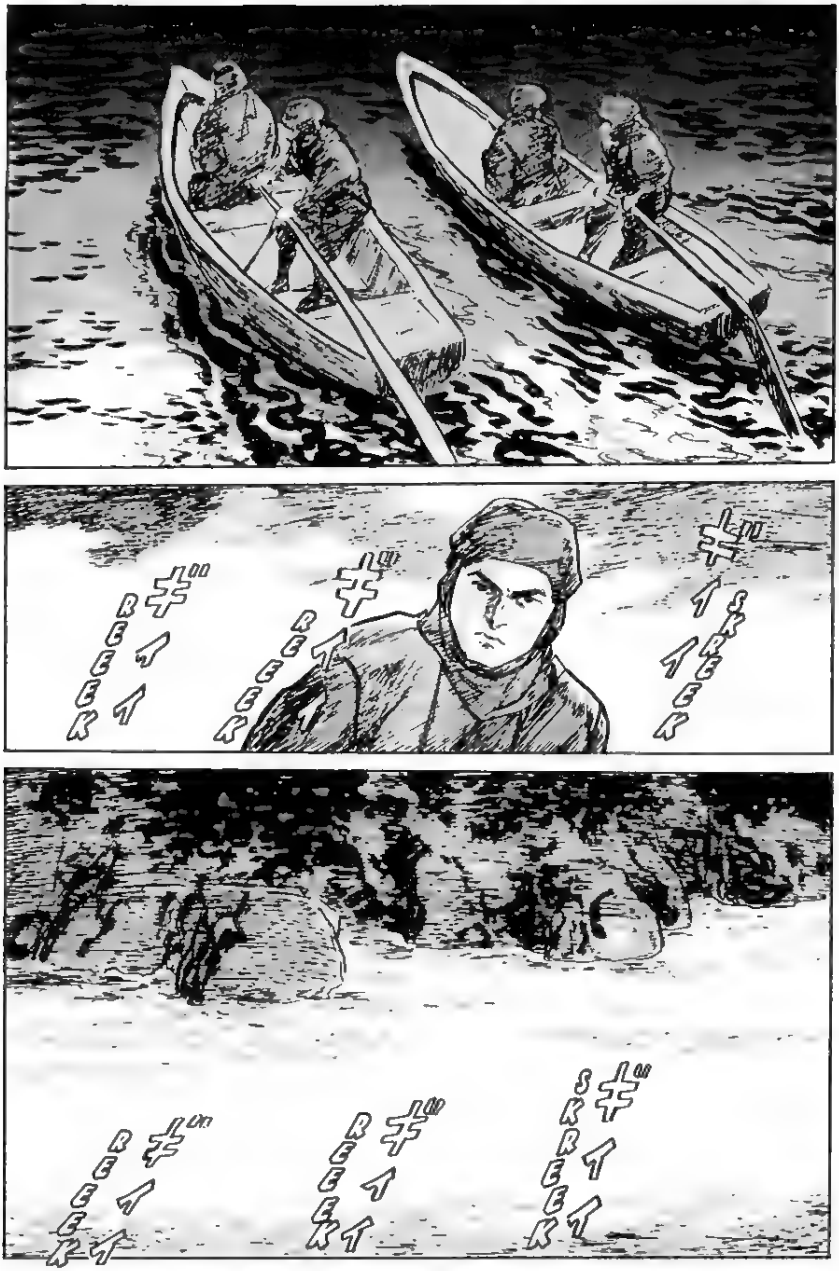
THEN THEY SHOULD HAVE MET BY NOW.

I SENT KOROKU ALONG WITH TWENTY MEN.

BALDY RAT! WHAT'RE YOU BLABBERING TO IEYASU-*DONO* ABOUT?!



ALL RIGHT ONE BOAT WILL STATION HERE
YES SIR
WE'LL USE SMOKE IF THE SUN IS OUT AND FIRE AFTER SUNSET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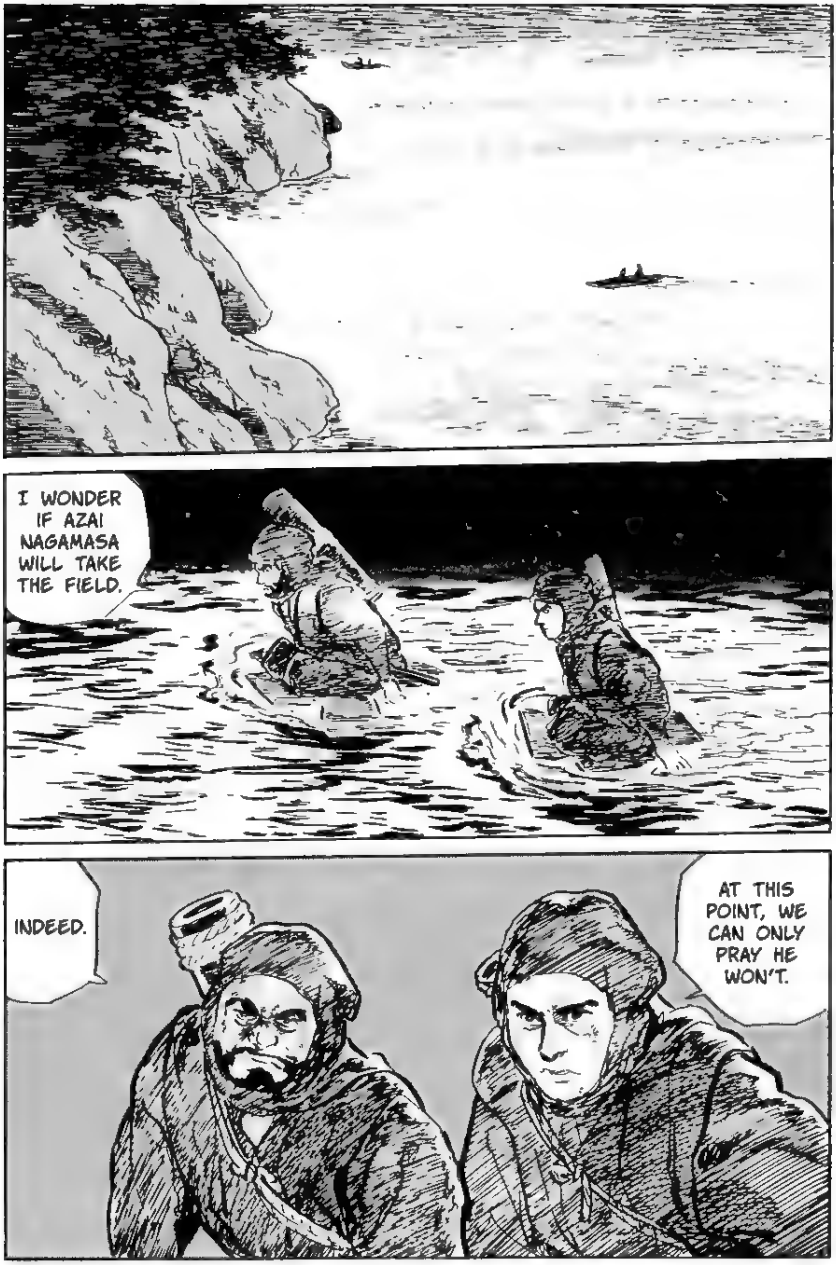
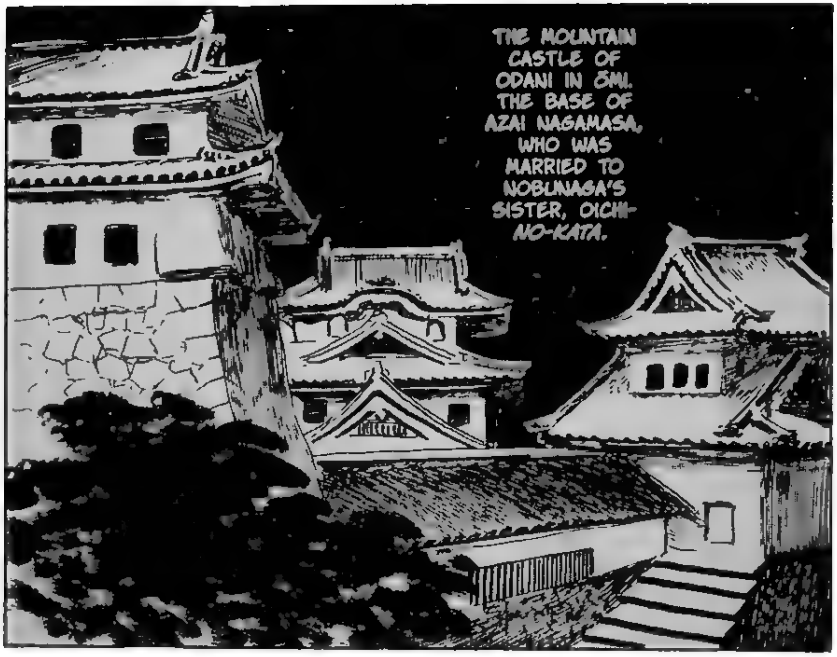

I WONDER IF AZAI NAGAMASA WILL TAKE THE FIELD.
INDEED.
AT THIS POINT, WE CAN ONLY PRAY HE WON'T.


THE MOUNTAIN CASTLE OF ODANI IN ŌMI. THE BASE OF AZAI NAGAMASA, WHO WAS MARRIED TO NOBUNAGA'S SISTER, OICHI-NO-KATA.

OICHI. AT OUR WEDDING, NOBUNAGA-SAMA SAID...
"LET'S DRINK AS BROTHERS NOW, AND LET'S DESTROY MINŌ AND ROKKAKU TOGETHER. EVENTUALLY THE TWO OF US WILL SEIZE CONTROL OF THE REIGN AND RULE THE NATION TOGETHER."
BUT MY FATHER SAYS, AZAI EXISTS TODAY ONLY BECAUSE THERE IS ASAKURA.

AT OUR WEDDING, I REPEATEDLY TOLD NOBUNAGA-*DONO* THAT...
...HE MUST NEVER ENGAGE IN WARFARE WITH ASAKURA.
NONETHELESS, IN THE END, IT WAS AN EMPTY PROMISE. BOTH ODA AND ASAKURA WERE *SHUGODAI*, APPOINTED BY THE *SHUGO* SHIBA CLAN. AFTER THE ŌNIN WAR, HOWEVER, ODA DENOUNCED ASAKURA AS TRAITORS.
ASAKURA CALLED ODA *MATAMONO* IN RETURN. SUCH IS THEIR RELATIONSHIP, THEY CANNOT COEXIST. ONE OF THESE DAYS, ONE HAS TO GO. IT'S THEIR DESTINY.

BETWEEN LOYALTY OR LOVE!
THE CHOICE I FACE IS.

THE THOUGHT HURTS ME.
IF YOU TURN AGAINST ASAKURA, EVEN IF YOU DO IT ONLY FOR ME, YOU WILL BE CENSURED FOREVER AS A COWARD.
MUGES-SAI!
IEYASU...HE MUST HAVE TASTED THIS VERY PAIN BEFORE.
WE'LL STRIKE ODA.
YES SIR!
HERE, SIR.

SO HUNT THEM.
BUT WE MUST NOT LET NOBUNAGA-*DONO* KNOW MY PLAN.
SUPPA FROM ODA AND TOKUGAWA MAY HAVE SNUCK IN.
YES SIR!

HM?
WAIT, KOROKU!
IT'S MUGESSAI, AN OFF-SHOOT OF HACHIYA.
THE SUPPA WHO JOINED HANDS WITH AZAI ARE HACHIYA FOLK, AREN'T THEY?
WE MUST HURRY!

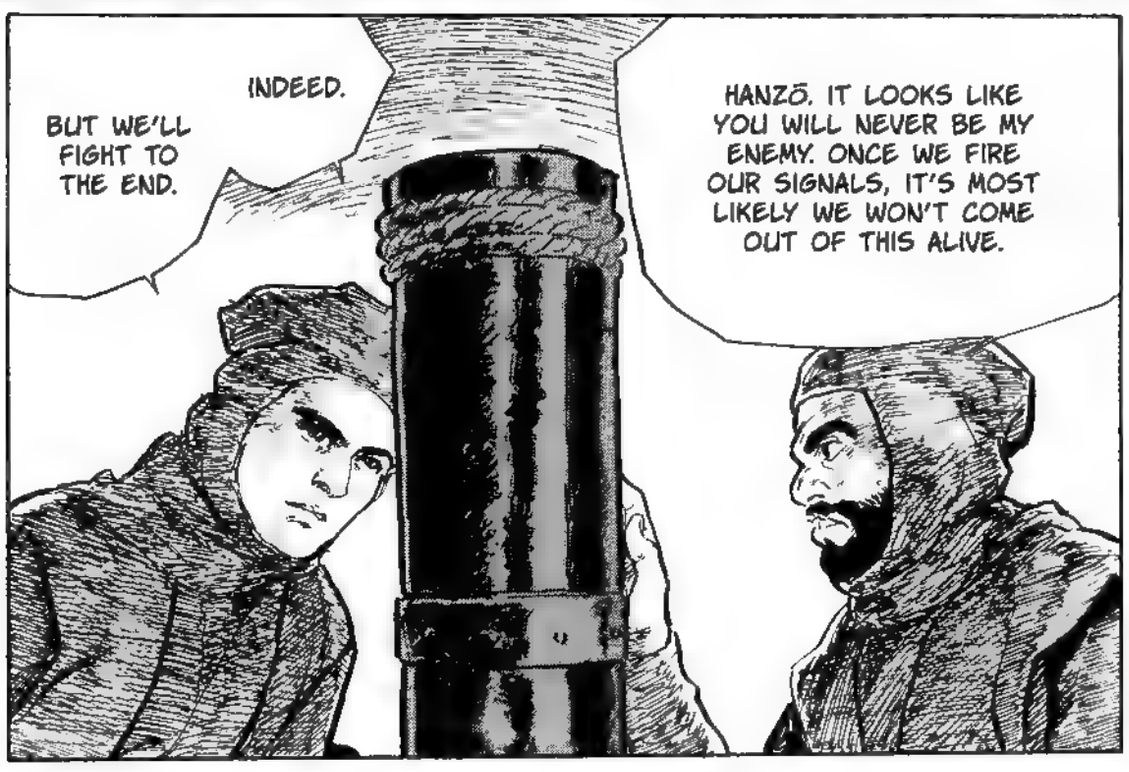
WELL, WHO KNOWS IF HE'D EVEN THINK OF IT.
IF AZAI NAGAMASA IS TO MAKE A MOVE, HE WOULD WANT IT KEPT QUIET, AND THAT MEANS HE WILL HAVE THE HACHIYA CATCH US.
TRUE.
IT WON'T HURT TO BE CAUTIOUS.
IT WOULD TAKE A LONG TIME TO SEARCH FOR US ACROSS THE LAND, BUT IF WE'RE ON THE LAKE, WE'RE EASY TO SPOT.
THAT MEANS... IF THE HACHIYA FOLKS ARE TO HUNT US, IT'S AN EASY JOB, ISN'T IT?
BE IT FIRE AT NIGHT OR SMOKE DURING THE DAY, IT WON'T BE EFFECTIVE UNLESS THE SIGNAL TRAVELS ACROSS THE LAKE. SO OBVIOUSLY WE WOULDN'T SEND IT OVER THE MOUNTAIN, FEARING IT MAY BE OBSCURED FROM VIEW.

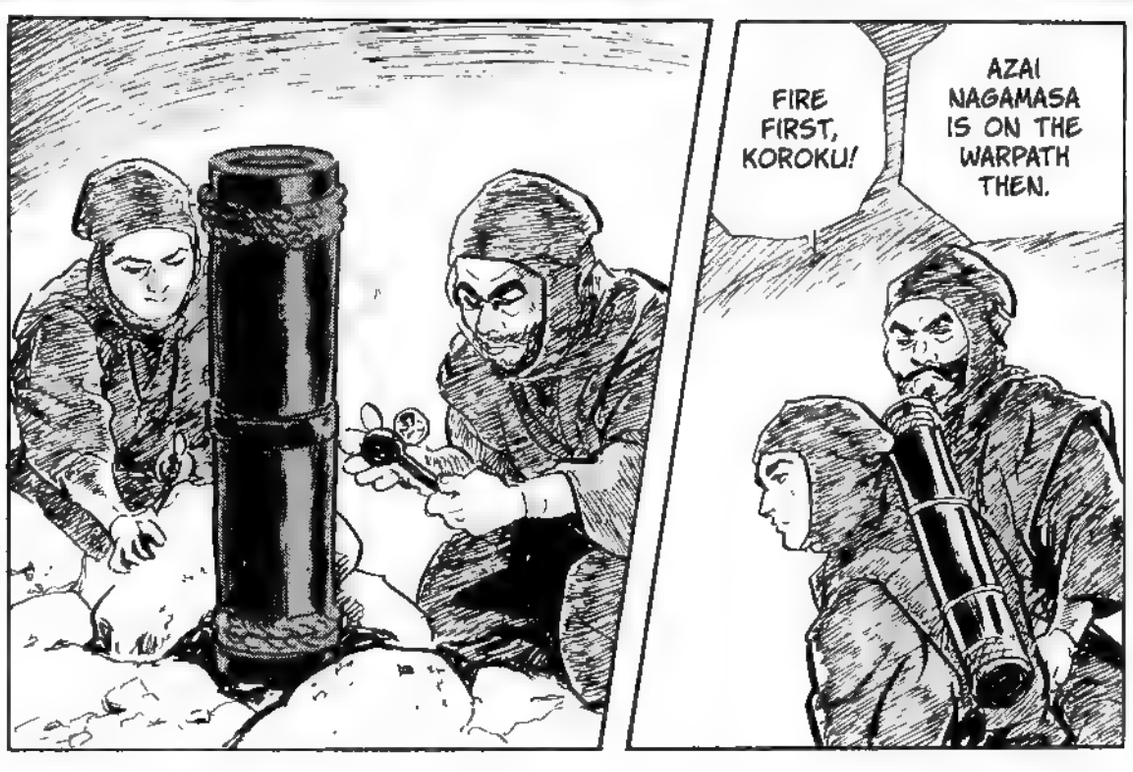
WITH THE HAZE LOWERING VISIBILITY, THE SIGNAL WILL BE HARDER TO SEE AT DAWN. WHAT THEY FEAR IS LETTING US SET IT OFF SUCCESSFULLY.
I BET THEY WON'T ATTACK UNTIL DAWN.
THEY MAY ALREADY BE THERE.
THAT MEANS THERE'S NO POINT IN GOING UP TO THE CASTLE. IF WE LOSE OUR RELAY MEN, WE LOSE THE MEANS TO ALERT OUR SIDE.
I'M SURE THEY'LL WANT TO FINISH US BEFORE IT'S TRIGGERED.
YUP.
IF THE HACHIYA COME LOOKING FOR US, IT MEANS AZAI NAGAMASA IS GOING TO TAKE THE FIELD.
ALL RIGHT! LET'S WAIT FOR THE HACHIYA BY THE LAKE INSTEAD OF OBSERVING THE CASTLE SOLDIERS!

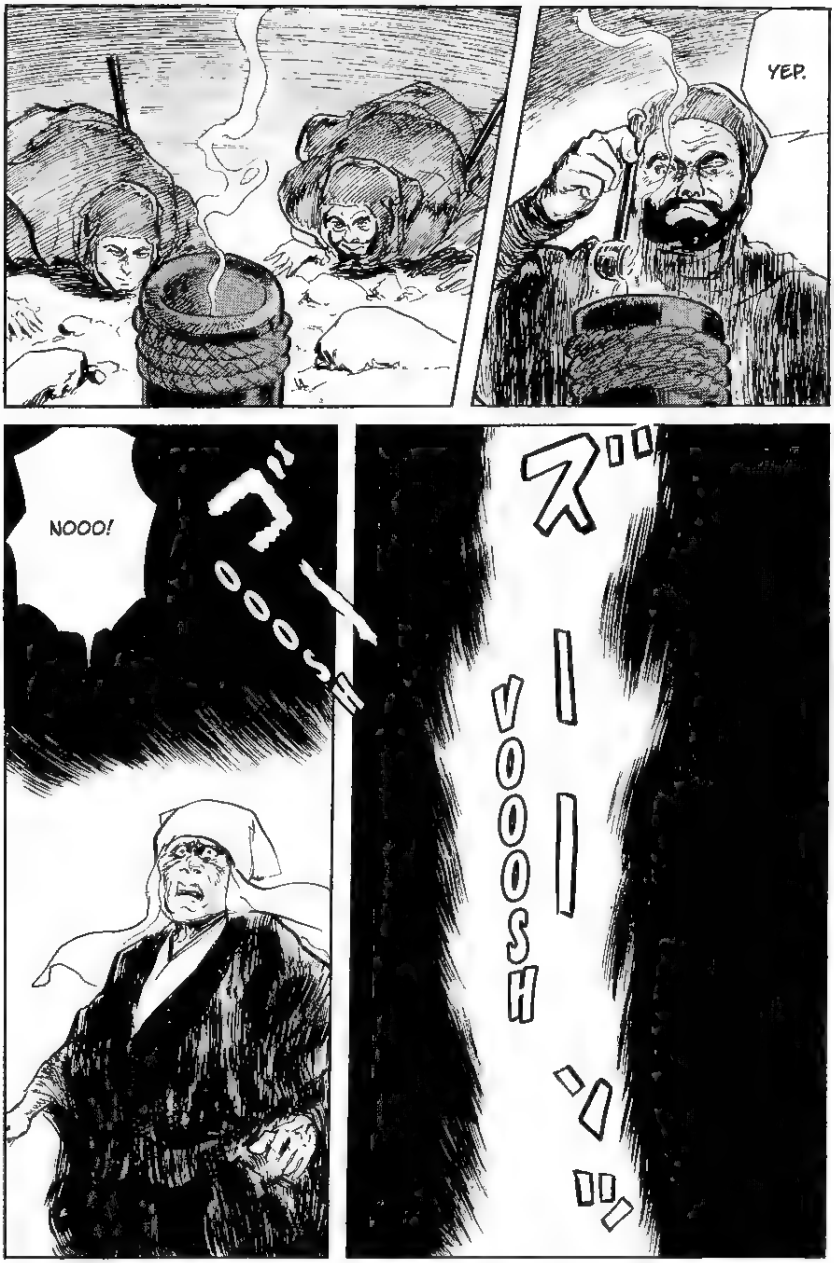
I HOPE YOU WILL NEVER BE MY ENEMY.
WHAT, KOROKU?
HANZŌ.
SAME HERE!

WE CAME UPON ONE TOO.
WE FOUND A RELAY.
THEIR SIGNAL WILL GO NOWHERE.
ONCE WE KILL THE MEN ON THE LAKE, THE ONES AT THE CASTLE WON'T BE ABLE TO SEND THEIR MESSAGE.
OR KOROKU, THE HENCHMAN OF HIDEYOSHI. OR BOTH.
UP AT THE CASTLE MIGHT BE HANZŌ, THE BEST OF IGA.
YES SIR!
WE STRIKE AT DAYBREAK.

THE SUN WILL RISE SOON.

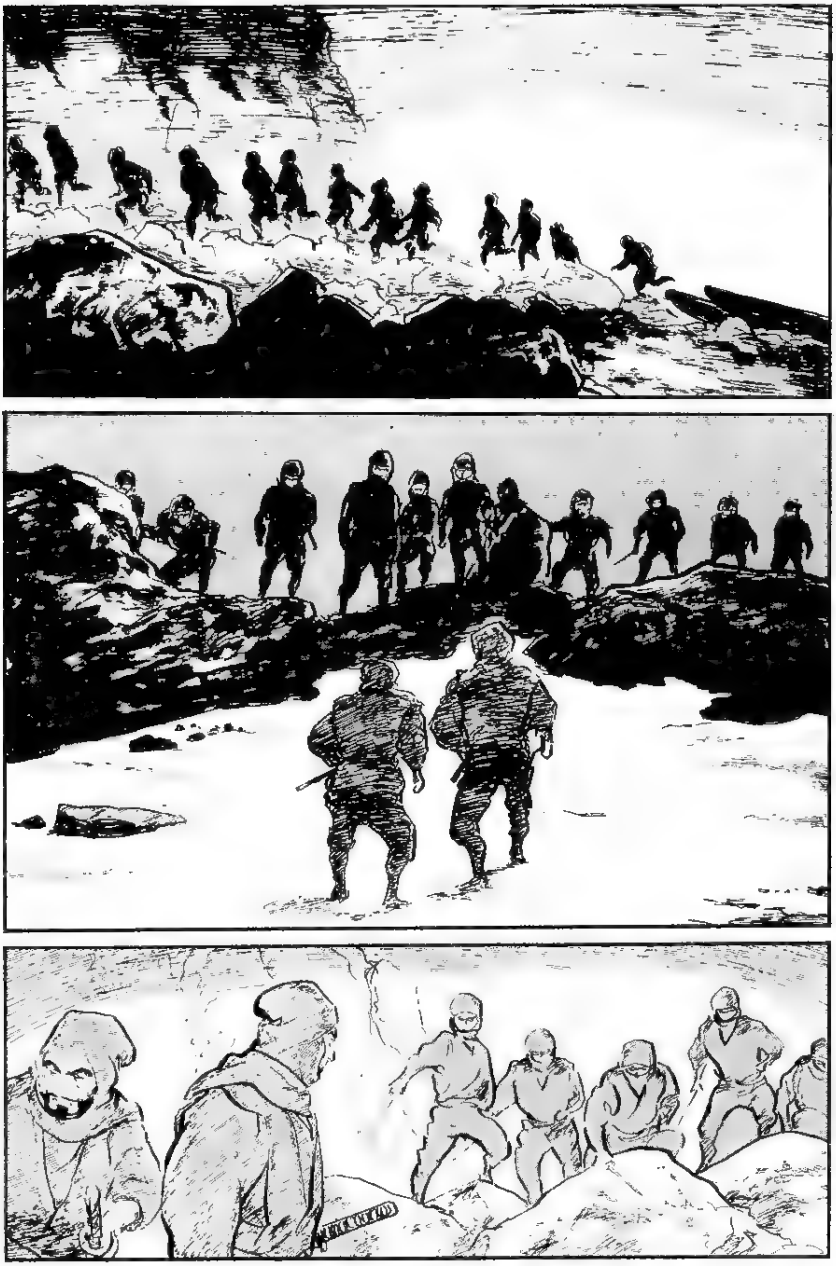

INDEED.
BUT WE'LL FIGHT TO THE END.
HANZŌ. IT LOOKS LIKE YOU WILL NEVER BE MY ENEMY. ONCE WE FIRE OUR SIGNALS, IT'S MOST LIKELY WE WON'T COME OUT OF THIS ALIVE.


FIRE FIRST, KOROKU!
AZAI NAGAMASA IS ON THE WARPATH THEN.


YEP.
NOOO!
ヴーン
VOOOSH
ヴーン
VOOOSH

URRGH!
KILL THEM!
MMG

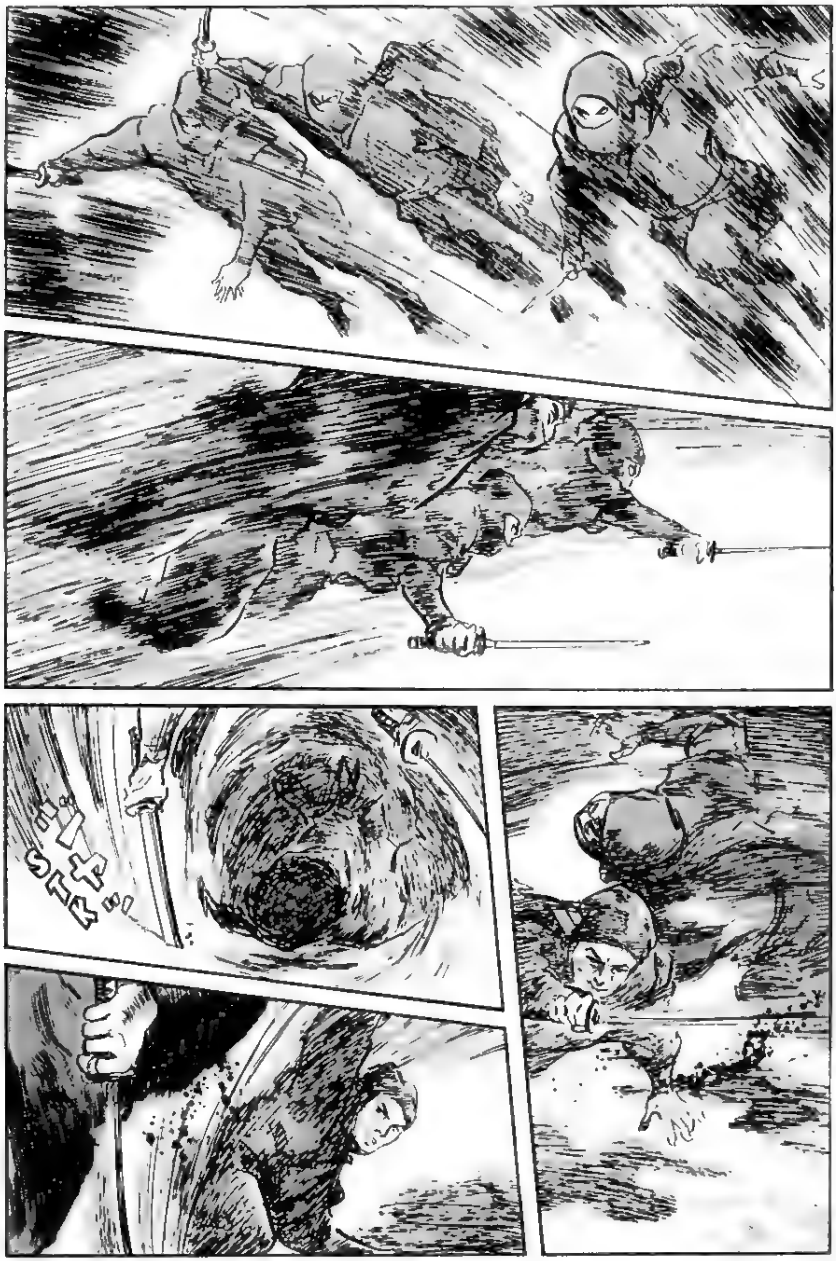
LET'S GO, KOROKU.
GOOD.
CREEE
CREEE



KILL THEM!
I KNEW IT WAS YOU, HANZŌ AND KOROKU!

MUGESSA!
NOW THAT WE'VE SENT OUR SIGNAL, YOUR OBJECTIVE IS RUINED.
WHAT?
I WILL DISEMBOWEL A DOZEN HACHIYA MYSELF.
LOOK. NONE OF US SUPPA GAIN ANYTHING BY KILLING ONE ANOTHER.
SO LISTEN, HOW ABOUT RESPECTING OUR LIVES AND GOING OUR SEPARATE WAYS?
IT WON'T BE EASY TO TAKE US OUT, YOU KNOW.

FINISH THEM!
CLOSE IN TIGHT AND KILL! THREE ON ONE!
WE WILL TERMINATE YOU BOTH FOR THE SAKE OF TOMORROW. THIS WAY, YOU WON'T INTERFERE EVER AGAIN.
THAT MAY BE TRUE FOR TODAY, BUT NOT TOMORROW.
BIZ
BIZ
SHAING
CLANG
CHOK
THOK


ズバッ
ズバッ

FUM

OIL BAGS!
FLOMP
FLOMP
POOF

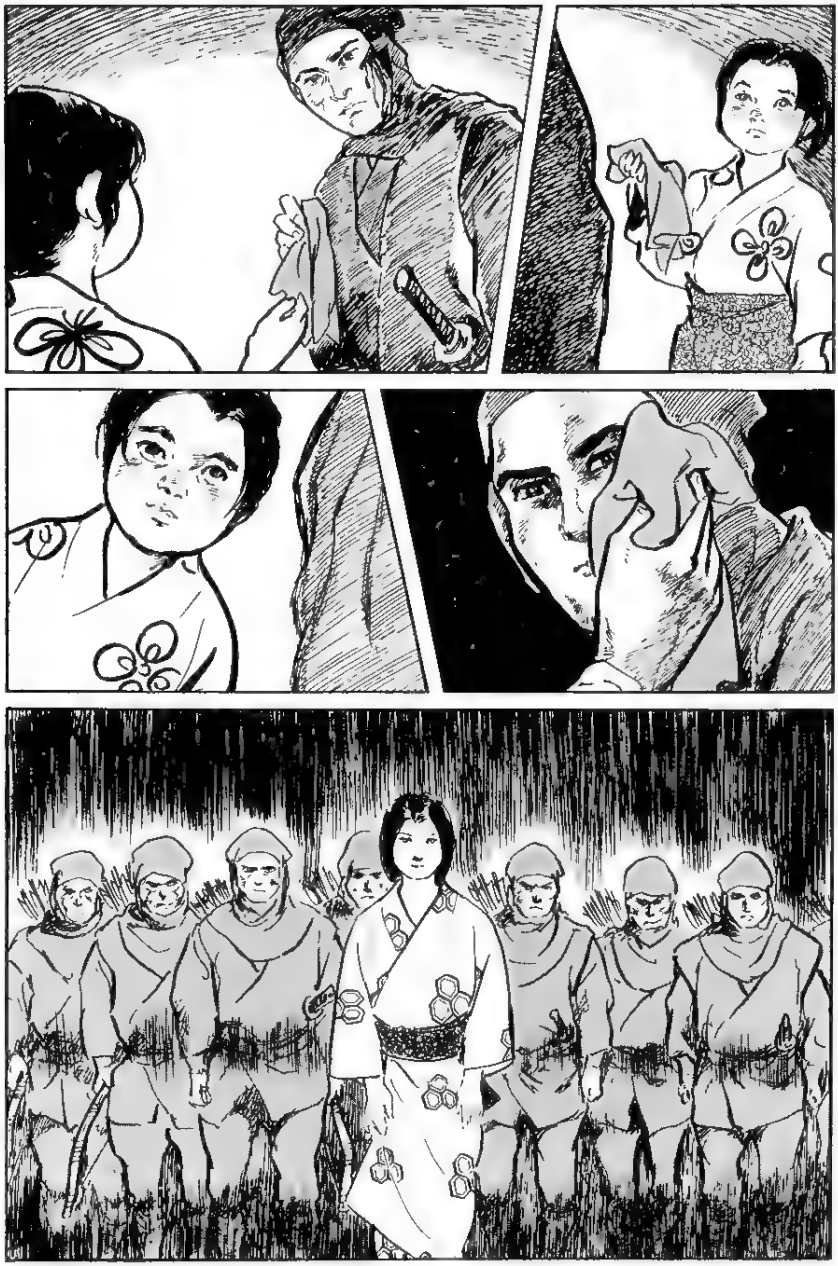
ゴォ
PFOOOOF

UGAH!
MMG!
WHOA.
MMG!

URK...
BASTARD! WHO THE HELL!
SHRNNG
GARRING

BRRNK
GLAH

HM?!



KI... KIKKŌ!
HE JUST TURNED SIX.
COME HERE, KANEMASA!
KANE-MASA.
YOUR NAME?
I AM KIKKŌ, THE HEAD.
ARE YOU THE IHORO FOLKS, BY ANY CHANCE?

I AM HANZŌ, THE BEST OF IGA. I AM YOUR FATHER.
I'M IMPRESSED, HANZŌ-SA! SO YOU ARE RELATED TO THE IHORO BY BLOOD?
HA HA HA HA HA
YOU'RE STRONG, KANEMASA!
YOU SAVED YOUR FATHER.

RIGHT AROUND THE SAME TIME, THE ODA-TOKUGAWA ALLIED FORCES DEVASTATED TEZUTSUYAMA CASTLE, KANEGASAKI CASTLE, AND HIKIDA CASTLE, AND WERE ABOUT TO SWARM STRAIGHT FROM KONOME PASS INTO THE MAIN CASTLE OF ASAKURA IN ICHIJŌGATANI.
WHAT'S THE MATTER, BALDY RAT?!
WHAT?!
HEAD FOR ICHIJŌ-GATANI NOW!!
WE ARE INVIN-CIBLE!

MI... MILORD!
NO!
WHA...?
TSU... TSUNAMI... COMING FROM KŌHOKU!!
SO WHAT IS IT?
...AND STRIKE US FROM BEHIND!!
MY MEN SIGNALED ME THAT AZAI WILL ACT IN CONCERT WITH ASAKURA...

NOOO! NAGAMASA ?!
HE WILL WAGE WAR AGAINST ME?! HIS BROTHER-IN-LAW?!
HE LOVES MY SISTER OICHI SO DEEPLY! HOW COULD HE!!
NAGAMASA WILL?!!

DAMMIT!!
THAT BASTARD!! I'LL SHRED HIM TO PIECES!
HOW DARE HE BETRAY ME...AFTER I WAS SO THOUGHTFUL TO HIM!!
AFTER I CHOSE TO LEAVE HIM ALONE, KNOWING HIS SITUATION WITH ASAKURA...HOW CAN HE NOT SEE MY SINCERITY!

BUHI-HI-HI-
NOW THAT IT'S COME TO THIS, THERE'S ONLY ONE THING TO DO. PUSH FORWARD! BEFORE NAGAMASA STRIKES, WE'LL CRUSH ASAKURA! AND THEN I WILL CHOP OFF HIS FACE MYSELF!
WE WILL TURN INTO A SURGING STORM AND SWALLOW ASAKURA.
BALDY RAT!! TELL IEYASU!

SHH
SHH.
WHOAH
LET'S GO!!
URRGH!! LET GO!!
Y...YOU MUST NOT, MILORD!!
PLEASE THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT THE POSITION WE ARE IN RIGHT NOW!!

WHAAAT !!
SO PLEASE ESCAPE!!
ASAKURA FORCES PRESSURE US FROM UP AHEAD, AND AZAI FORCES BLOCK US FROM BEHIND!!
NO, NOT QUITE! WE STILL HAVE TIME BEFORE THEY WALL US IN!
WE ESTABLISHED AN UNDERSTANDING WITH KUTSUKI *SHINANO-NO-KAMI* MOTOTSUNA-*DONO*, WHO GOVERNS KUTSUKIDANI, THROUGH MATSUNAGA HISAHIDE-*SAMA*, THAT HE WILL HELP US SHOULD AN EMERGENCY ARISE.
UR...
SEEK ASSISTANCE FROM AWAYA *ETCHŪ-NO-KAMI* IN SAGAKI, PASS THROUGH KUTSUKIDANI, AND ENTER THE CAPITAL.
THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY OUT OF THIS.

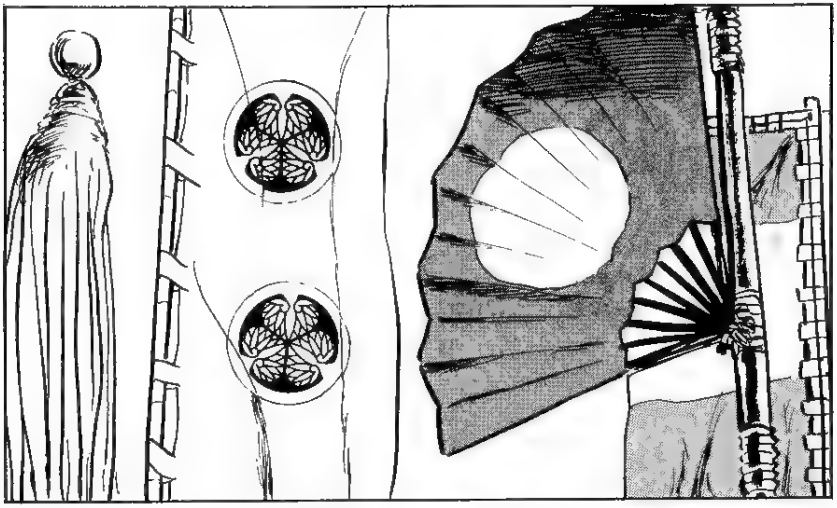
WHY DO YOU HESITATE, MILORD?!
NOW IS THE ONLY CHANCE! DELAY HALF AN HOUR, AND WE'LL BE FLANKED BY OUR ENEMIES FRONT AND BACK.
AND...AND YOU WILL SEE YOUR LIFE COME TO AN END, TOO, MILORD!
TŌKICHIRŌ.
SENDING YOUR MEN TO ALERT US OF AZAI'S MOVE WAS EXCELLENT. "SHOULD AN EMERGENCY ARISE," YOU APTLY THOUGHT OF THE POSSIBILITY.
EVEN MORE, YOU'VE ALREADY MADE ARRANGEMENTS WITH KUTSUKI MOTOTSUNA.
I AM IMPRESSED YOU'VE TAKEN THIS MUCH PRECAUTION WITHOUT MY KNOWLEDGE.
INDEED, KUTSUKI AND HISAHIDE ARE OLD FRIENDS. AND YOU THOUGHT OF THEM, EVEN THOUGH I'VE FORGOTTEN....

YOU LOOKED AS IF YOU'D BITE ME IF I DIDN'T LISTEN!
HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA.
HA HA HA HA HA
YOU DID WELL TO MAKE THE ARRANGE-MENT...
HA HA HA HA

THIS TŌKICHIRŌ WILL BRING UP THE REAR.
BUT--
I WILL DO WHAT YOU'VE SUGGESTED.
I WILL LEAVE AS MANY GUNS AS I HAVE.
FORGIVE ME, TŌKICHIRŌ!
THE PURSUIT OF THE ASAKURA FORCES IS EASY ENOUGH TO BLOCK, I ASSURE YOU.

MY WORDS OF APOLOGY WON'T BE ENOUGH TO ABSOLVE THIS, BUT PLEASE TELL IEYASU-DONO THAT I AM SORRY.
AS TO AZAI NAGAMASA, IT IS THE ONLY MISTAKE I'VE MADE IN MY LIFE.
SLAP!
THIS WAR IS LOST!
I ASSIGNED THE REAR GUARD TO BALDY RAT! WE'LL FLEE TO THE CAPITAL THROUGH KUTSUKI!

SSSSS
HA HA HA HA
...TO FORGIVE.
...MILORD... ASKED ME...
FORGIVE...



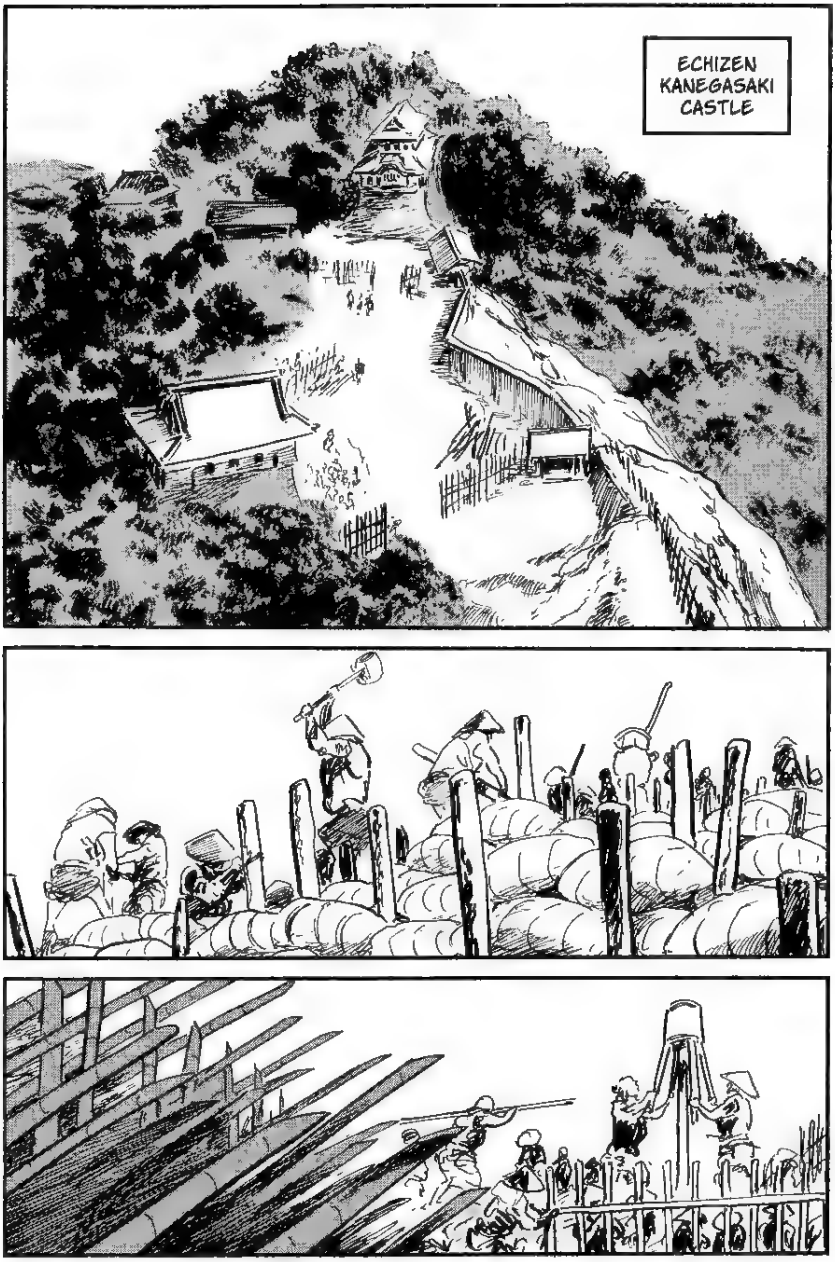
AS FAR AS ODA IS CONCERNED, I AM AN UPSTART WITH THE HUMBLE BEGINNINGS OF A SUPPA.
DID HE? HE APOLOGIZED?

THAT WAS ALL I HAD IN MIND WHEN I MADE MY ARRANGEMENTS.
THAT'S WHY, AT A TIME LIKE THIS, I MUST DO THINGS TO MAKE MYSELF STAND OUT.

BUT...
AND I HAVE A FEELING THAT SOMEWHERE IN MY MIND, I WAS HOPING AZAI WOULD TAKE THE FIELD.
I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THE PURITY OF HIS HEART UNTIL TODAY, MAYBE BECAUSE, AS AN OUTSIDER, I COULD NOT STOP FEELING SERVILE.
NOW THAT I SAW MILORD SHEDDING TEARS, I DON'T MIND DYING ANYTIME.
WHAT?!
I WILL STAY BEHIND WITH YOU.
ANYHOW, I'LL TAKE CARE OF THE REST. SO, YOU TOO, PLEASE TAKE FLIGHT, IEYASU-SAMA.

AND TWO, I WANT TO WAIT FOR HANZŌ.
I HAVE TWO REASONS. I WANT NOBUNAGA-*DONO* TO BE IN MY DEBT, FOR ONE.
THE LANDS OF IHORO *SHINOBI* AND NEGORO *SHINOBI*, EH?
THAT IS, FROM OBAMA OF WAKASA TO NEGORODANI... THROUGH HARIHATA TO MT. KURAMA, AND THEN INTO KYOTO. THAT IS HOW WE'LL FLEE.
BECAUSE I AM CERTAIN HE WILL COME BACK. AND ONLY IF HE DOES CAN I GET OUR ESCAPE ROUTE TO OPEN.
HOWEVER, EVERYTHING HINGES ON ASAKURA'S NEXT MOVE.
I SEE. THE LANDS OF THOSE BACKED BY HANZŌ-*SA*, INDEED. IT'S AN EXCELLENT IDEA!

HE WON'T.
WILL ASAKURA YOSHIKAGE EXERT A DESPERATE EFFORT TO PURSUE NOBUNAGA-*DONO*?
I AGREE WITH YOU COM-PLETELY.
PROBABLY NOT.
INDEED. I'M STAKING MY LIFE ON IT.
IT'S A BIG GAMBLE.


ECHIZEN
KANEGASAKI
CASTLE

I CAN LEAVE TWENTY TO THIRTY CAVALRY.
I HEAR YOU'VE AGREED TO BRING UP THE REAR. I AM TRULY GRATEFUL. IF YOU NEED EXTRA MEN, PLEASE TELL ME.
I'LL GLADLY DO IT.
THE MORE YOU CAN, THE MORE HELPFUL IT WILL BE.
PLEASE LEAVE YOUR GUNS BEHIND RATHER THAN YOUR MEN.
I WISH YOU GOOD LUCK IN BATTLE.
EXCUSE ME.

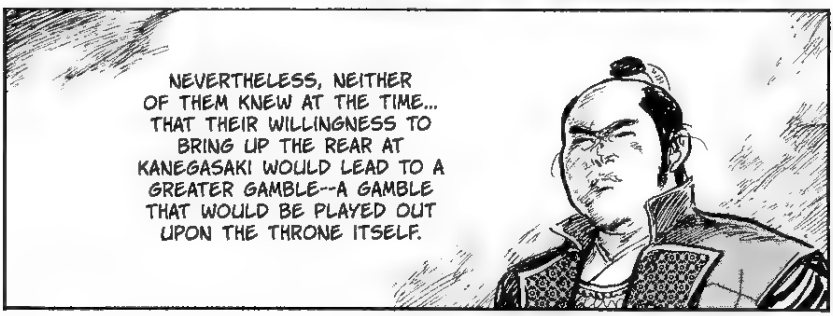
AS YOU SEE, ODA'S KEY VASSALS, THE HEREDITARY VASSALS, ARE COMING TO GREET ME, THE UPSTART, ONE AFTER THE OTHER.
IT SURE FEELS GREAT.
WE MERELY HAVE TO ENDURE THE PRESENT, IS ALL.
FROM NOW ON, I CAN LIVE WITHOUT BEING FEARFUL OF HIM. THE THOUGHT ALONE MAKES ME HAPPY.
AS FOR ME, I AM LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING NOBUNAGA-DONO ONCE I RETURN ALIVE.
HM. IF THE FIRELOCKS GET WET, OUR LIVES WILL BE DAMPENED TOO.
I HOPE IT WON'T RAIN...

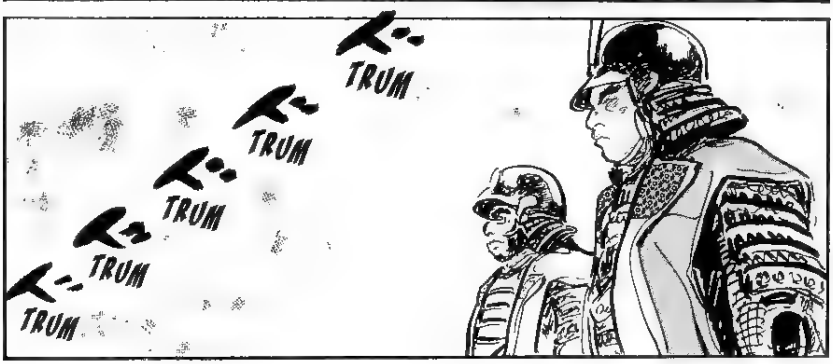
UNTIL TODAY, I TOOK YOU WRONG. I THOUGHT YOU WERE AN UPSTART WHO CURRIED MILORD'S FAVORS THROUGH FLATTERY.
TŌKICHI-DONO.
I CAN DIE WITHOUT ANY REGRETS.
YOUR UNDER-STANDING MAKES ME EXTREMELY HAPPY.
PLEASE FORGIVE ME.
IEYASU-DONO, WE WILL NOT FORGET YOUR ASSISTANCE THE REST OF OUR LIVES.
HA HA HA HA HA HA.
GOOD LUCK IN BATTLE.
I WILL LEAVE EVERY GUN BEHIND.
AND WE WILL NEVER WASTE EITHER OF YOUR DEATHS.

SO WE'RE ALREADY CONSIDERED DEAD.
HA HA HA HA HA
HA HA HA HA HA
HEH HEH HEH HEH. THAT MEANS WE WON'T DIE AGAIN.
HA HA HA HA HA
HA HA HA HA HA
KNOWING THE CHANCE OF THEIR SURVIVAL MIGHT BE ONE IN TEN THOUSAND...
AND THEY MUST BUY AS MUCH TIME AS THEY COULD.
EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE LAUGHING, THEIR HEARTS WERE FROZEN. WITH A SMALL ARMY, THEY WERE TO REMAIN AT KANEGASAKI CASTLE AND MEET THE GREAT FORCE OF ASAKURA AS IT SURGED UPON THEM.
HA HA HA HA HA
HA HA HA HA HA

AND YET, THEY PLACED EVERYTHING ON IT. HIDEYOSHI DID SO TO IMPROVE HIS POSITION WITHIN ODA'S MAIN CAMP.
AND TO SECURE A POSITION AS A WARLORD.
NOT TO BE SLIGHTED AS A BALDY RAT AGAIN.

THAT WAS HIS GAMBLE.
BY CHOOSING TO BE THE REAR GUARD, HE MEANT TO ENHANCE AND SECURE HIS STATUS TO THAT OF NOBUNAGA'S EQUAL.
THE WAY THINGS WERE, HE FEARED HE WOULD BECOME ODA'S HENCHMAN.
IEYASU DID SO TO BE NO LONGER ODA'S LACKEY.

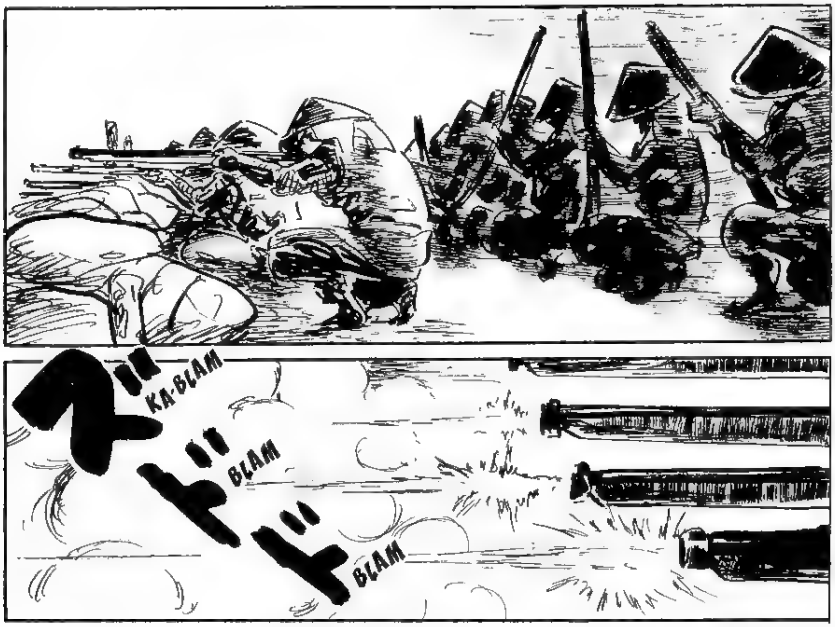

NEVERTHELESS, NEITHER OF THEM KNEW AT THE TIME... THAT THEIR WILLINGNESS TO BRING UP THE REAR AT KANEGASAKI WOULD LEAD TO A GREATER GAMBLE--A GAMBLE THAT WOULD BE PLAYED OUT UPON THE THRONE ITSELF.

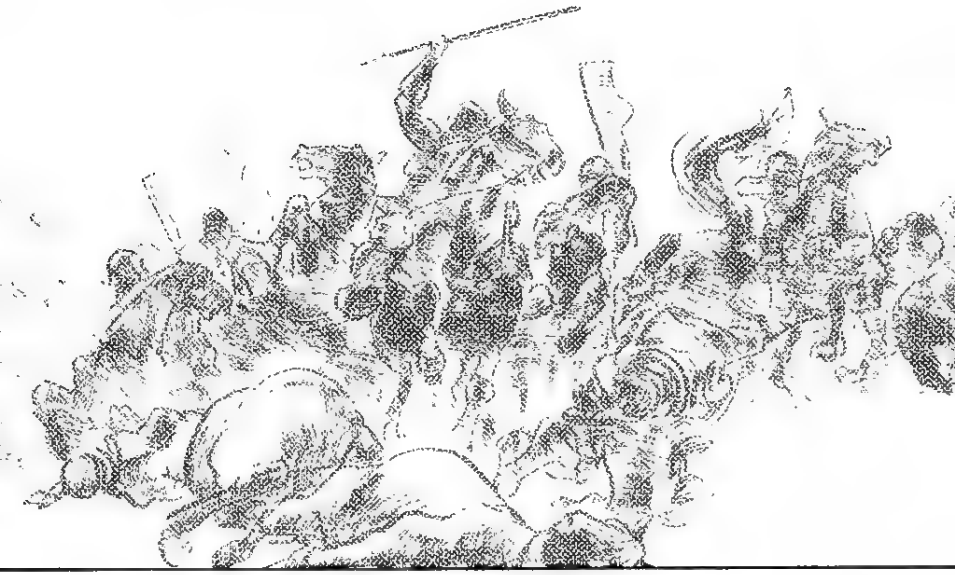

TRUM
TRUM
TRUM
TRUM
TRUM

TRUM
TRUM
TRUM
WE'LL FIRE AFTER WE DRAW THEM CLOSER!
NOT YET!

POW
POW
POW
BOOM
BOOM
BOOM
BOOM
BOOM
BOOM

BLAST 'EM!!
FIRE!!

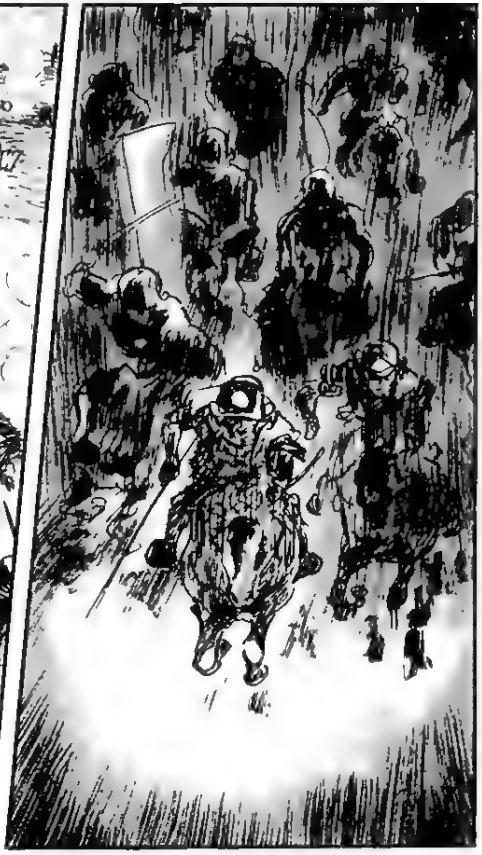

KA-BLAM
BLAM
BLAM



FORGIVE ME.
TŌKICHI... TAKECHIYO...
RMMBL
RMMBL
IT STARTED !!

LOOK! ODA IS PULLING BACK.
THAT'S THE SORT OF MAN HE IS.
I HAVE A FEELING IT'S MY MASTER, THE BALDY RAT, WHO CHOSE TO BE THE REAR GUARD.
I'LL HEAD FOR KANEGASAKI. I'M CERTAIN MILORD IS WAITING THERE FOR ME.
NEVER! WE DIED ONCE WE CAN'T DIE AGAIN.
LET'S GO TO DIE AGAIN THEN?

POW
POW
POW
POW
POW
POW



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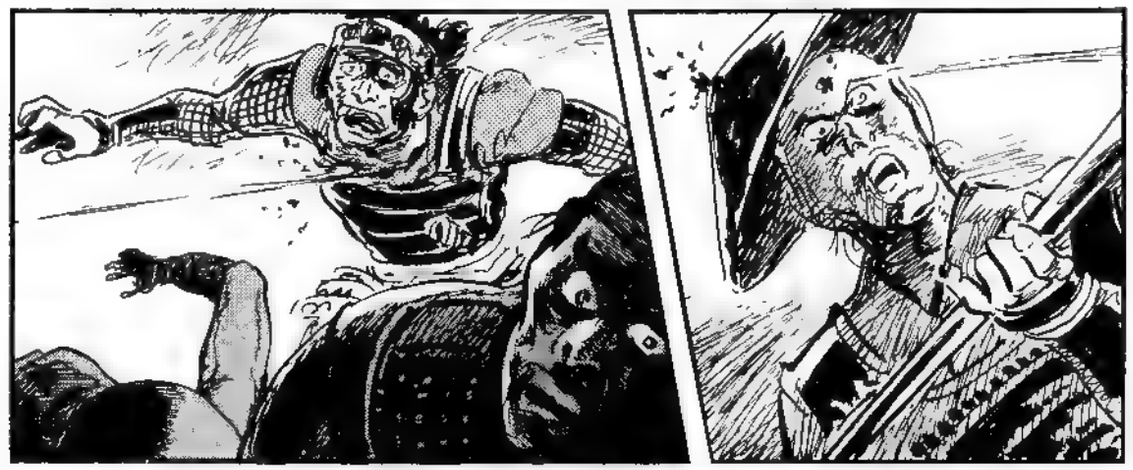

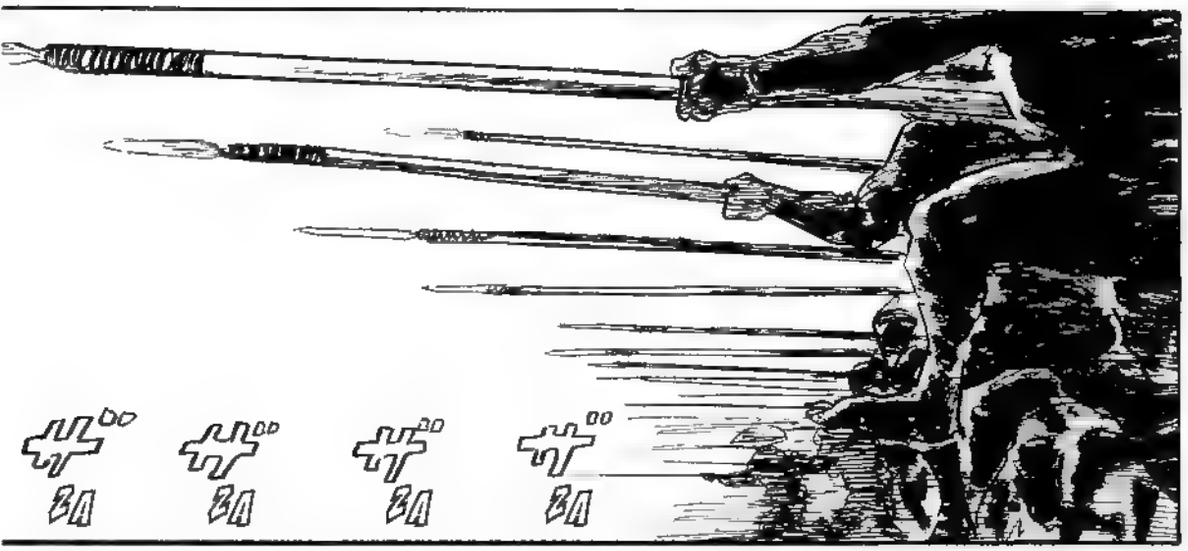
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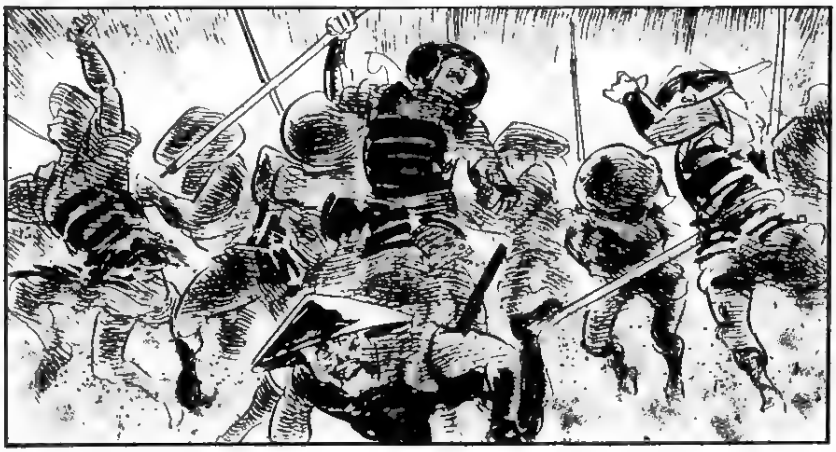
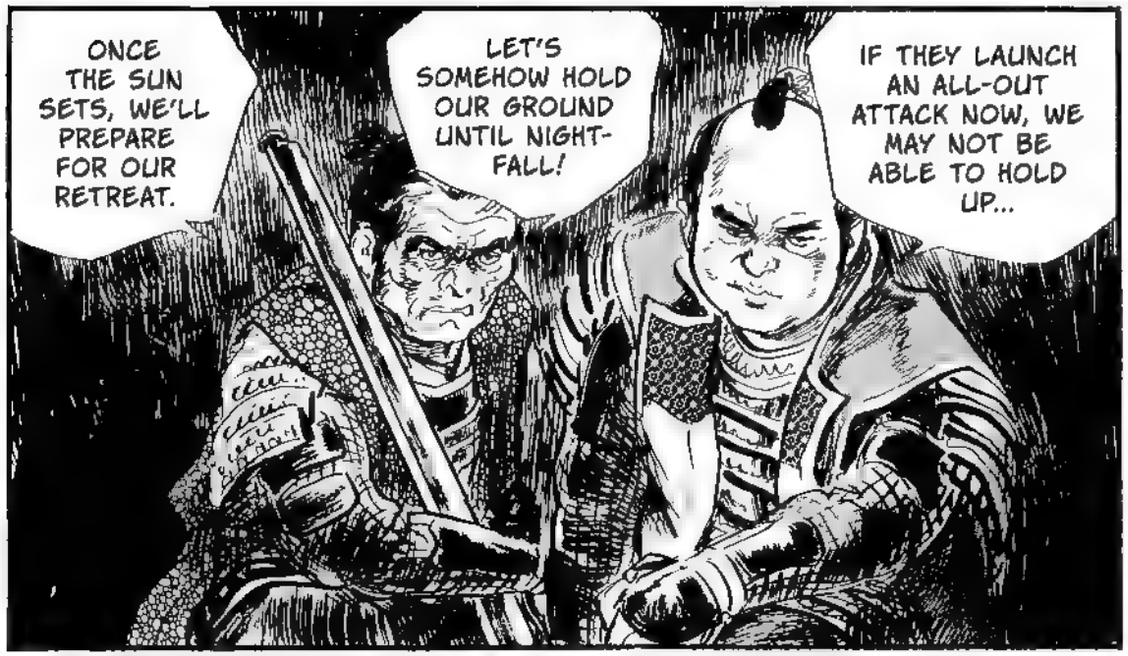


KA-BLANNG-!
BLAM
KA-BOOM-!
KA-BOOM-!


ONCE THE SUN SETS, WE'LL PREPARE FOR OUR RETREAT.
LET'S SOMEHOW HOLD OUR GROUND UNTIL NIGHT-FALL!
IF THEY LAUNCH AN ALL-OUT ATTACK NOW, WE MAY NOT BE ABLE TO HOLD UP...

HANZŌ ISN'T HERE YET, EH?

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KO...
KOROKU
?!
HANZŌ
!!

HANZŌ-SA HAS SUMMONED THE IHORO FOLK! ONCE NIGHT FALLS, WE'LL HAVE THE UPPER HAND!
MASTER!
MILORD!
HMM. THAT IS SO LONG AS ASAKURA DOES NOT COME RUNNING AFTER US.
IF YOU LEAVE TONIGHT, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO MAKE IT.
AZAI HAS NOT CUT OUR ESCAPE ROUTE YET!
IT'S ALMOST TIME! THE MOMENT OF OUR GREAT GAMBLE!

GWA HA HA HA HA HA. I WILL OBEY YOUR ORDERS.
FIRE AND RETREAT. FIRE AND RETREAT. GOT IT?
YOU'RE THE ONLY ONES WHO CAN SHOOT IN THE DARK OF NIGHT. BUT DON'T GET CARRIED AWAY. KOROKU, YOU UNDERSTAND?
WE'LL WAIT TWO LI FROM HERE FOR YOU.
PA-POW
POW
POW
POW
POW

MASTER!! PLEASE LEAVE NOW!
THEY'RE HERE!
PULL BACK TWO LI!
YES.
HE IS MY LORD AND YOURS TOO!

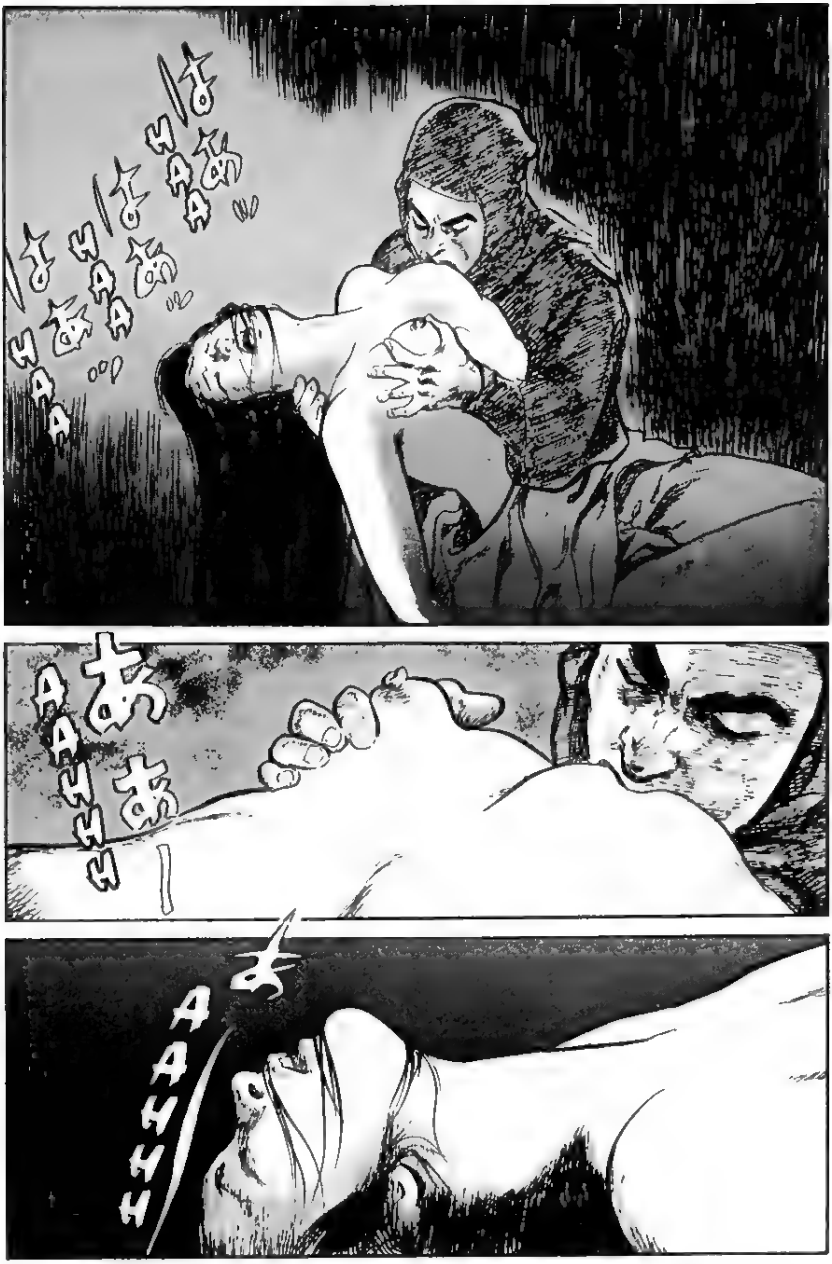
AS KIKKŌ WATCHED IEYASU RETREAT AND ESCAPE INTO THE DARKNESS, SHE REPEATED HANZŌ'S WORDS IN HER MIND.

"HE IS MY LORD, AND YOURS TOO."

BUT AS TIME PASSED SHE GAVE BIRTH TO A CHILD WITH THE WORDS HANZO UTTERED HE PERMITTED HER TO STAY BY HIS SIDE
WHEN HAS ATTEMPTED TO KILL EVASU IN THE EAST
AND TOLD HER TO BE WITH HIM AND SERVE THE SAME MASTER

THE SMELL OF YOUR HAIR... I HAVEN'T FORGOT-TEN.
YOUR SMELL...
I'M SO HAPPY.
YOU MUST'VE BEEN LONELY.

YOU MUST NOT GO BEYOND WHERE YOU ARE!
WAIT!
THEY'VE GOT TO LIVE TO THE FULLEST WHILE THEY STILL CAN!
KNOWING THEY MAY DIE TOMORROW...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AAHHH
AHHH
AHHH
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AUUUU
AHHHH
MAYBE.
YOU THINK WE'LL HAVE A SECOND BABY?

THEY'RE COMING!
FIRE!

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PA-
POW
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POW
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BAM
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BAM
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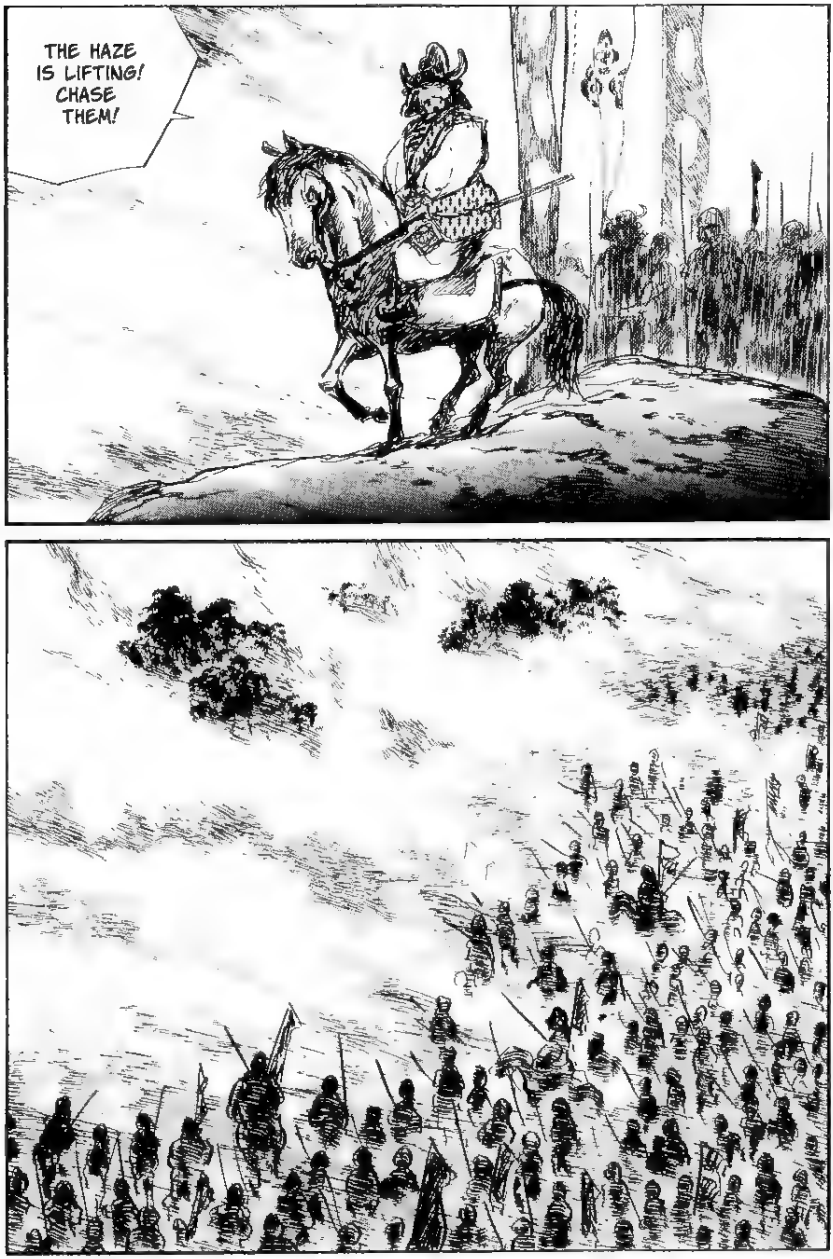
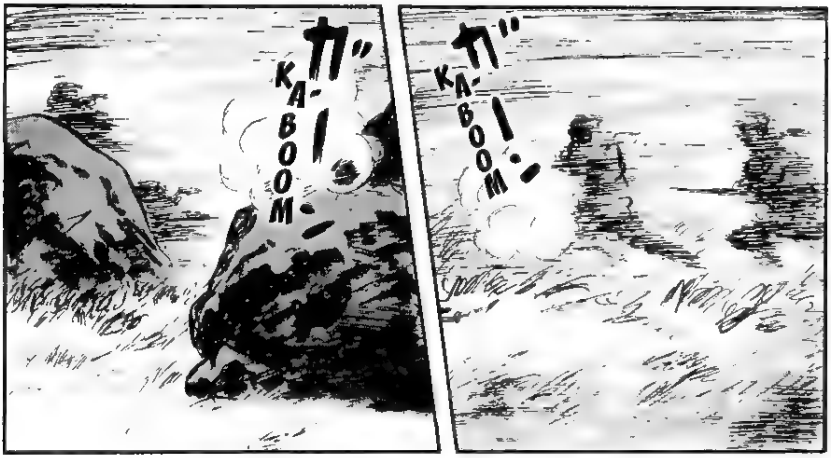
KA-BOOM!
KA-BOOM!

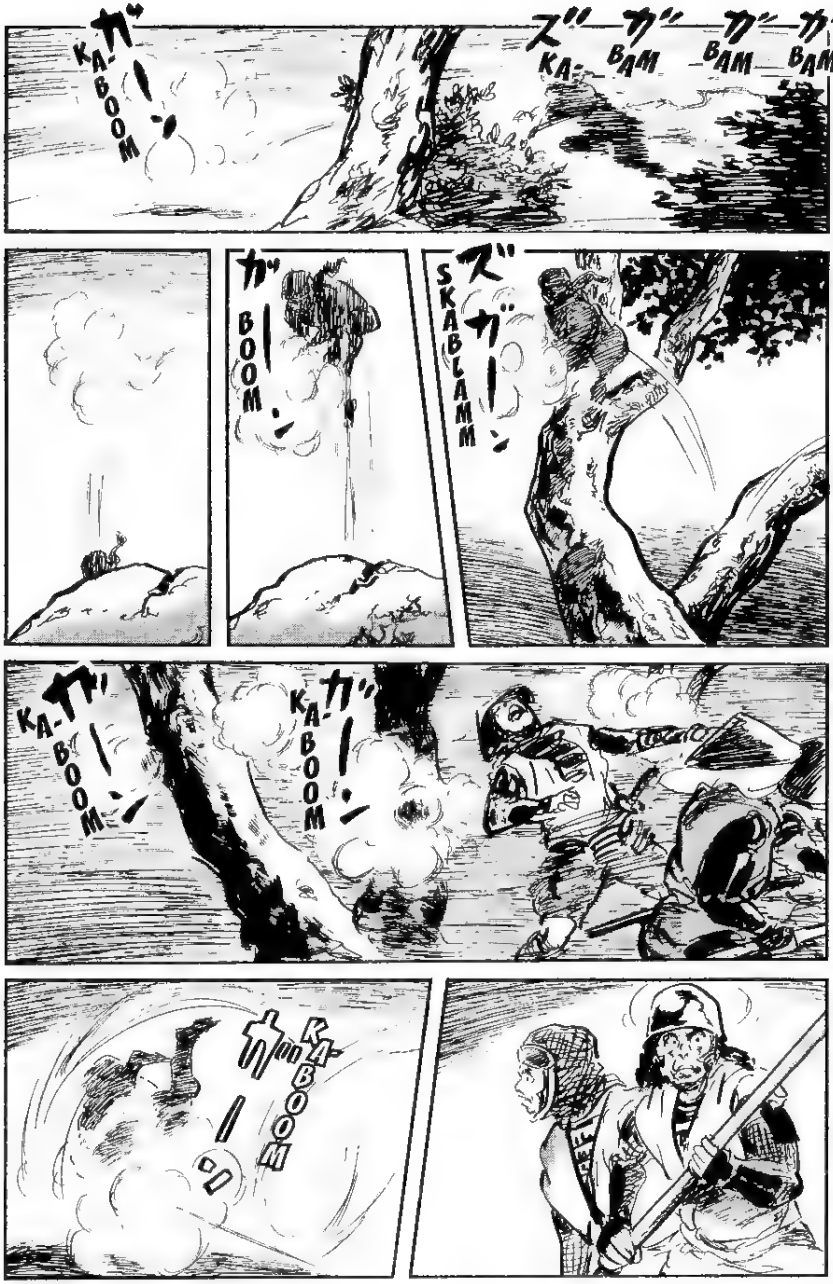
BA-ZOO
POW-OO
POW-OO
POW-OO
POW-OO
TRUM
TRUM
TRUM
TRUM


THE HAZE IS LIFTING! CHASE THEM!

DOKYUUUUN
DOKYUUUUN
KA-BOOM
BA-BOOM
PA-
POW
PA-
POW

WHERE IS OUR ENEMY?!
WHERE...WHERE THE HELL ARE THEY SHOOTING FROM?!


KA-BOOM
KA-BOOM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COFF

PULL OUT! OUT!
DRAW BACK! DON'T CHASE DEEP! WE'LL SANDWICH THEM AFTER NAGAMASA GETS HERE.
BASTARDS! HOW MANY GUNS HAVE THEY GOT?! IT'S INCREDIBLE!
BAOOOH
NOT KNOWING IT WOULD COST HIM ANY CHANCE TO RULE THE COUNTRY AND EVEN HIS OWN TERRITORY...
AND HE THOUGHT IT WAS A WASTE TO LOSE MORE SOLDIERS BY FIGHTING THE DOGGED RESISTANCE OF THE ODA-TOKUGAWA ALLIED FORCES.
HAVING DRIVEN NOBUNAGA TO FLEE, HE FELT SATISFIED.
ASAKURA YOSHIKAGE TOOK CARE OF THE BASICS BUT WAS ULTIMATELY CARELESS.

THERE!
ISN'T THE SCOUT BACK YET?
TOO SLOW!
I HAVE A REPORT, SIR! NOB...NOBUNAGA HAS ALREADY LEFT FOR THE CAPITAL, TAKING THE SAGAKI-KUTSUKI ROUTE! THEY'RE PROBABLY NEAR SAGAKI BY NOW.

HOW COULD THEY ESCAPE WITH ASAKURA FORCES IN HOT PURSUIT?!
SO... FAST!
...AAT?
WHA...
THAT'S... THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE!!
NO. HE TOOK FLIGHT, BRINGING ALMOST ALL HIS ARMY WITH HIM...
IS HE NEARLY ALONE, WITH A SMALL TROOP?
THEY'LL PROBABLY MAKE IT TO THE CAPITAL FROM KURAMA.
ONLY A SEPARATE GROUP, LED BY NIWA NAGAHIDE AND AKECHI MITSUHIDE, HEADED FOR NEGORO FROM WAKASA TO ESCAPE.

KINOSHITA TŌKICHIRŌ AND TOKUGAWA IEYASU ARE BRINGING UP THE REAR. AFTER A SKIRMISH WITH ASAKURA FORCES, THEY ALREADY TOOK FLIGHT AS WELL.
ONLY A SMALL MUSKET COMPANY STAYED BEHIND AND HELD THE ASAKURA FORCES IN CHECK, BUT THEY TOO DISAPPEARED.
AT THAT POINT, THE ASAKURA FORCES CANCELED THEIR PURSUIT.
THEY'RE NOW RALLYING THEIR TROOPS AND HEADING BACK TO ICHIJŌGATANI.

HOW CAN I BELIEVE SUCH A THING!!
IT'S... IT'S UN-BELIEV-ABLE !!
KLANG
BECAUSE NOW IS THE ONLY CHANCE FOR US TO SEND NOBUNAGA TO HIS GRAVE!
I...I MADE MY SOLDIERS PUSH FURIOUSLY, STAKING EVERYTHING ON THIS! ON THIS VERY MOMENT!

NOTHING IS MORE MISERABLE THAN SOLDIERS WHO LOSE CONFIDENCE. IT WOULD BE SO EASY TO CRUSH THEM IN RAPID SUCCESSION!
IF ASAKURA BECAME A FIREBALL AND CHASED ODA RELENTLESSLY, BELIEVING THIS TO BE THE DECISIVE MOMENT, NOBUNAGA WOULD HAVE HAD TO FIGHT DESPERATELY AS HE RETREATED.
AFTER CHASING THE RETREATING ENEMY, HOW CAN HE STOP HIS PURSUIT WITHOUT EVEN BEHEADING THE OPPOSING GENERAL WHO BROUGHT UP THE REAR ?!
HOWEVER, IF ASAKURA TOOK A BREAK ALONG THE WAY AS THEY FOLLOWED, THE ENEMY COULD EASILY GET AWAY. HOW CAN YOSHIKAGE-*DONO* NOT KNOW THIS.
AHH!
ALAS!
THE WHOLE POINT OF MY TAKING THE FIELD IS WASTED.
ECHIZEN ASAKURA. YEARS HAVE PASSED AS THEY INDULGED IN PEACEFUL INDOLENCE WITHOUT CONFLICT. IN THE END, THEY FORGOT EVEN THE ART OF WAR.

NOW THAT IT'S COME TO THIS, I SHALL TURN INTO A DEMON OF ESHŪ AND ONCE MORE FIGHT A DECISIVE BATTLE WITH NOBUNAGA FOR HEGEMONY!
KUD
KUD
KUD
IRREGU-LARS ?!
I HAVE A REPORT, SIR! THERE ARE MORE THAN A DOZEN IRREGULARS WHO APPEAR TO BE ON ODA'S SIDE WHO ARE ABOUT TO FLEE RIGHT NOW.

THEY MAY BE MY ENEMY, BUT STILL, THEY ARE REMARK-ABLE.
TOKUGAWA IEYASU'S SUPPA, I GUESS. THEY'RE PROBABLY THE ONES WHO KILLED MUGESSAI AND HIS MEN.
AGAIN?
SUPPA, I BELIEVE.
TAKE YOUR FEET OUT OF YOUR STIRRUPS!
LOWER YOUR SPEARS!
LET THEM PASS. I WANT TO SEE THEIR FACES.
WHA... WHAT THE?!

IF WE WAIT FOR NIGHT AND DISAPPEAR INTO THE DARK, IT'S EASY ENOUGH TO GET AWAY.
CRAP! ONE MORE STEP AND AZAI COULDN'T HAVE BLOCKED OUR RETREAT!
THEY'VE PROBABLY HEARD THEIR SCOUTS BY NOW AND LOST THEIR FIGHTING SPIRIT.
DO THEY MEAN TO SALUTE US?
LOOK! THE CAVALRY MEN ARE ALL TAKING THEIR FEET OUT OF THEIR STIRRUPS!
HEY! THE ENTIRE ARMY LOWERED THEIR SPEARS!
AND LET US PASS?

NO. I HAVE A FEELING HE WANTS TO TELL US SOMETHING.
I'M IMPRESSED. HE IS AZAI NAGAMASA, INDEED! HE KNOWS IT'S USELESS TO FIGHT US.

I AM AZAI NAGA-MASA.

I AM HACHISUKA KOROKU, A VASSAL OF KINOSHITA TŌKICHIRŌ HIDEYOSHI.
I AM HATTORI KANZŌ MASANARI, A VASSAL OF TOKUGAWA IEYASU.

HA HA HA HA HA HA.
THANKS TO YOU, I WAS FORE-STALLED.
YOU DEFEATED MUGESSAI AND PROMPTLY ALERTED THE ODA-TOKUGAWA ALLIED FORCES OF MY ACTIONS. THEN YOU EVEN TOOK ON THE TASK OF BRINGING UP THE REAR OF THE REAR GUARD. INDEED, YOU SERVE YOUR MASTERS REMARKABLY WELL. I SHALL NOT FORGET YOUR NAMES.
NICKNAMED FUTATSUDAMA, HE IS AN EXCELLENT GUNMAN.
ANYWAY, NEWS HAS BEEN BROUGHT TO MY ATTENTION.
APPARENTLY, SASAKI SHŌTEI HIRED A *SUPPA* CALLED ZENJUBŌ. HE IS ONE OF MUGESSAI'S UNDERLINGS.

BUT WHY ...?!
IT'S OBVIOUS WHOM HE WAS SENT AFTER. SO BE CAREFUL.
BESIDES, I DISLIKE FOUL MURDER. GENERALS SHOULD CUT EACH OTHER'S THROATS ONLY DURING BATTLE.
AT HEART I REGARD NOBUNAGA-*DONO* AS MY BROTHER.

KO...KOROKU! CAN WE STOP HIM IN TIME?!
WHERE WILL ZENJUBŌ ATTACK NOBUNAGA-DONO...?
THAT WE DON'T KNOW... SO IT'S HARD TO TELL...

HANZŌ! IF THE MAN IS TO SHOOT AT NOBUNAGA-*DONO*, WHERE WOULD HE DO IT?
HM!
EVERY BEAST HAS ITS OWN TERRITORY. WHEN IT'S OUTSIDE ITS TERRITORY, IT IS EXTREMELY CAREFUL. BUT WHEN IT'S INSIDE ITS OWN TERRITORY, IT LOWERS ITS GUARD.

AND HE IS TRAVELING THROUGH SOMEONE ELSE'S TERRITORIES, WHICH PROBABLY MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE TO SHOOT HIM.
NOT THAT I'M COMPARING NOBUNAGA-SAMA TO A BEAST, BUT NONETHELESS, HE IS ON THE RUN AT THE MOMENT.
THAT'S MY GUESS.
THAT MEANS HE WON'T BE SHOT AT BEFORE HE REACHES KYOTO.
I... I AGREE WITH YOU.
ZENJUBŌ KEEPS TWO GUNS READY AND IS EXPERT AT FIRING IN SUCCESSION. THAT'S WHY HE'S NICKNAMED FUTATSUDAMA.
JUST LIKE HAVING TWO ARROWS READY TO SHOOT...
WHEN HE'S ON HIS WAY BACK TO GIFU FROM KYOTO... THAT'S WHEN IT'S MOST DANGER-OUS.

FLY, HANZŌ!
SO ONCE HE FIRES AT YOU, YOU'VE GOT NO CHANCE!
WE'RE NOT GOING TO LET A BULLET OR TWO RUIN ALL THE EFFORT WE'VE GIVEN THUS FAR.
YES SIR!
STOP HIM!

HUH ?!
JUST A SECOND.
WAIT, KOROKU.
B... BUT...
KNOWING HIM, HE MAY THINK IT'S A FAIR GAME. WHO KNOWS, HE MIGHT EVEN TAUNT THE MAN TO TRY TO SHOOT HIM.
THE MAN MUST BE STOPPED, BUT WITHOUT TELLING MILORD.
THIS WAY, HE'LL RIDE IN A PALANQUIN, NOT ON HORSEBACK.
WE NEED THE SOLE OF HIS FOOT INJURED.
WHAT?
I HAVE AN IDEA. HAVE HIM STEP ON A THORN.

ALSO, FIX THE PALANQUIN SO THAT NO BULLET CAN PENETRATE.
YES!
NOW GO! HANZŌ-SA, I COUNT ON YOU TOO!
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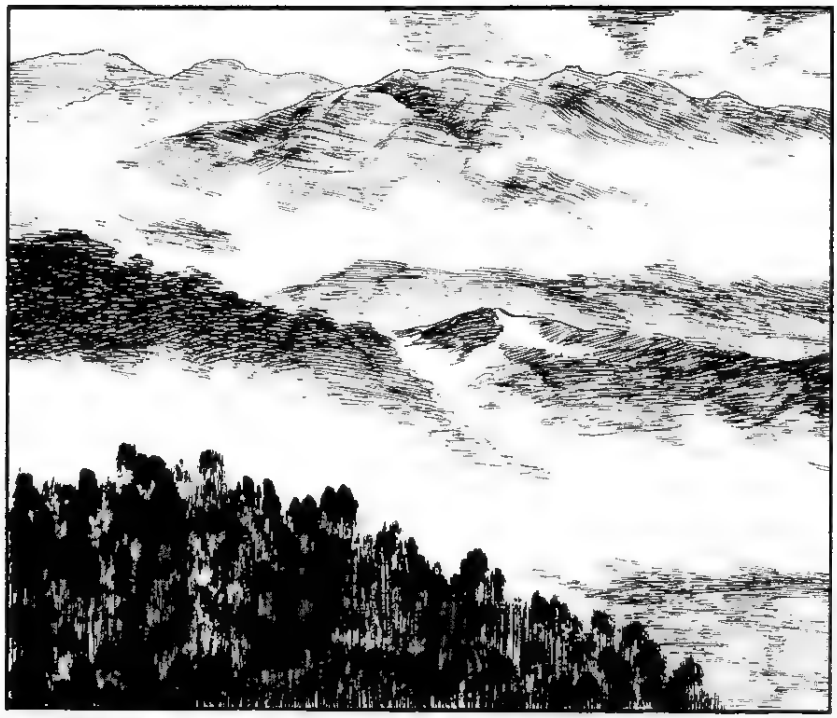

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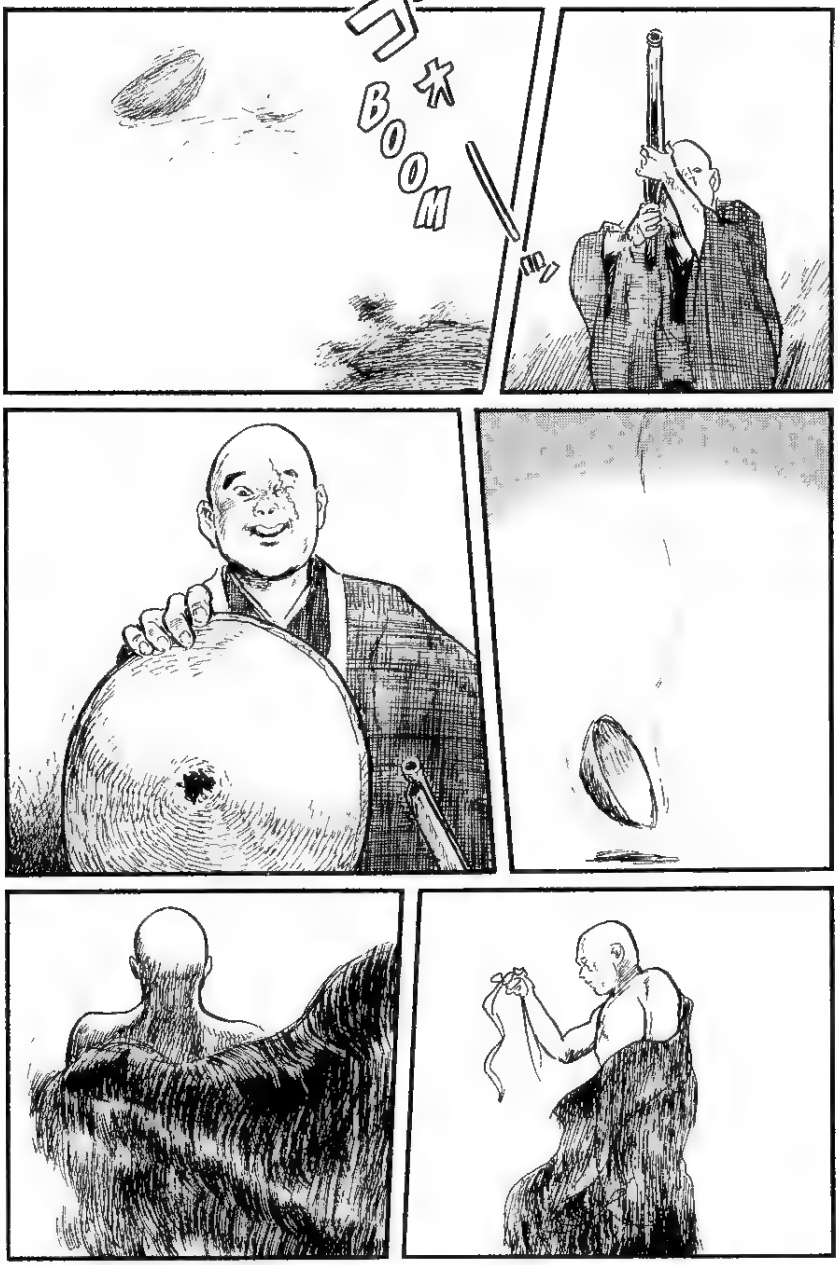
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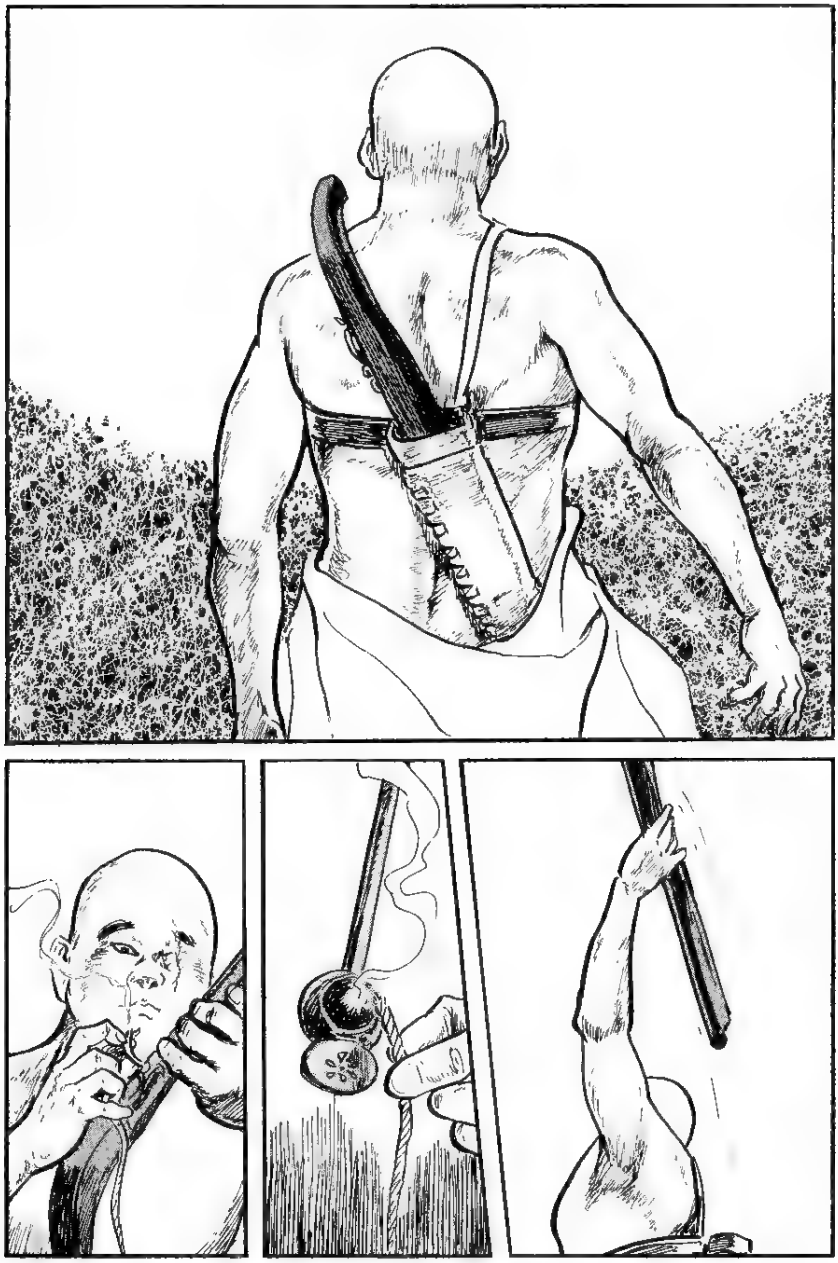

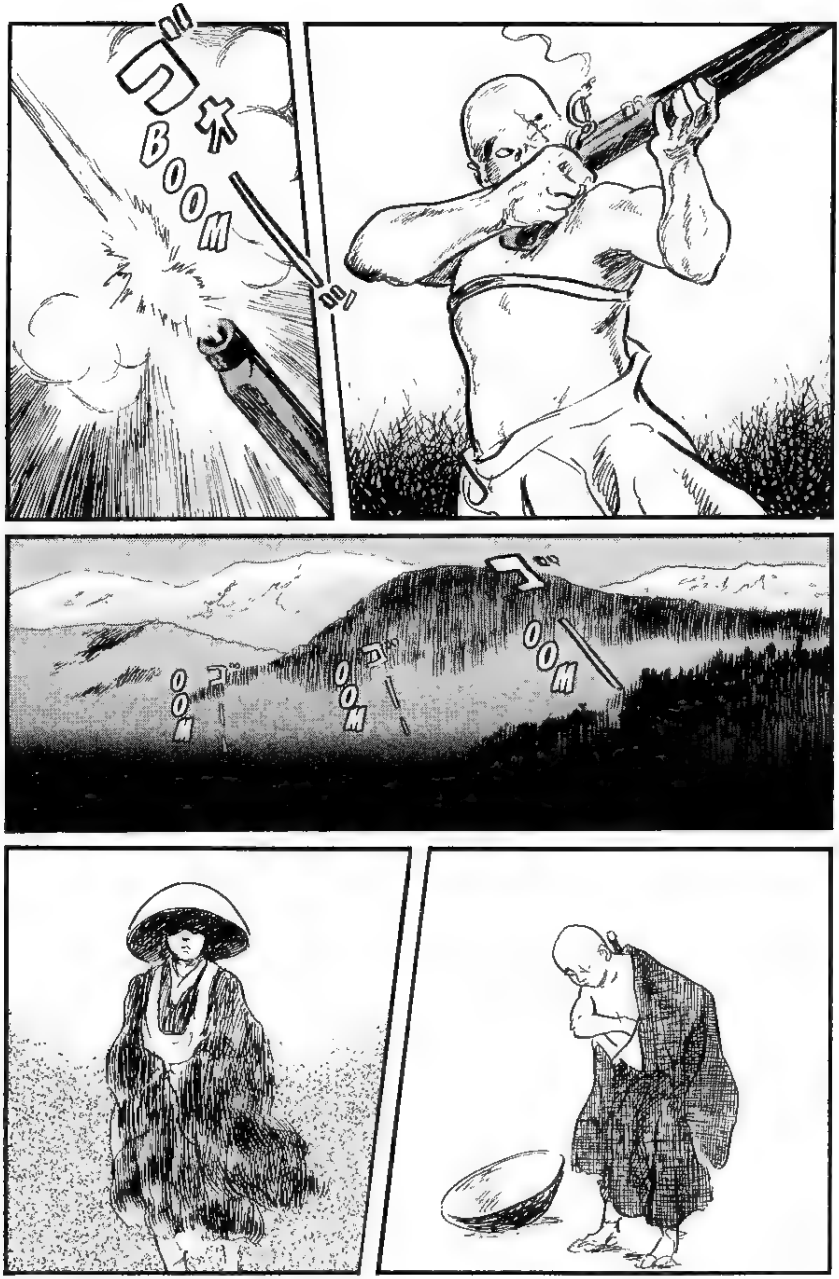
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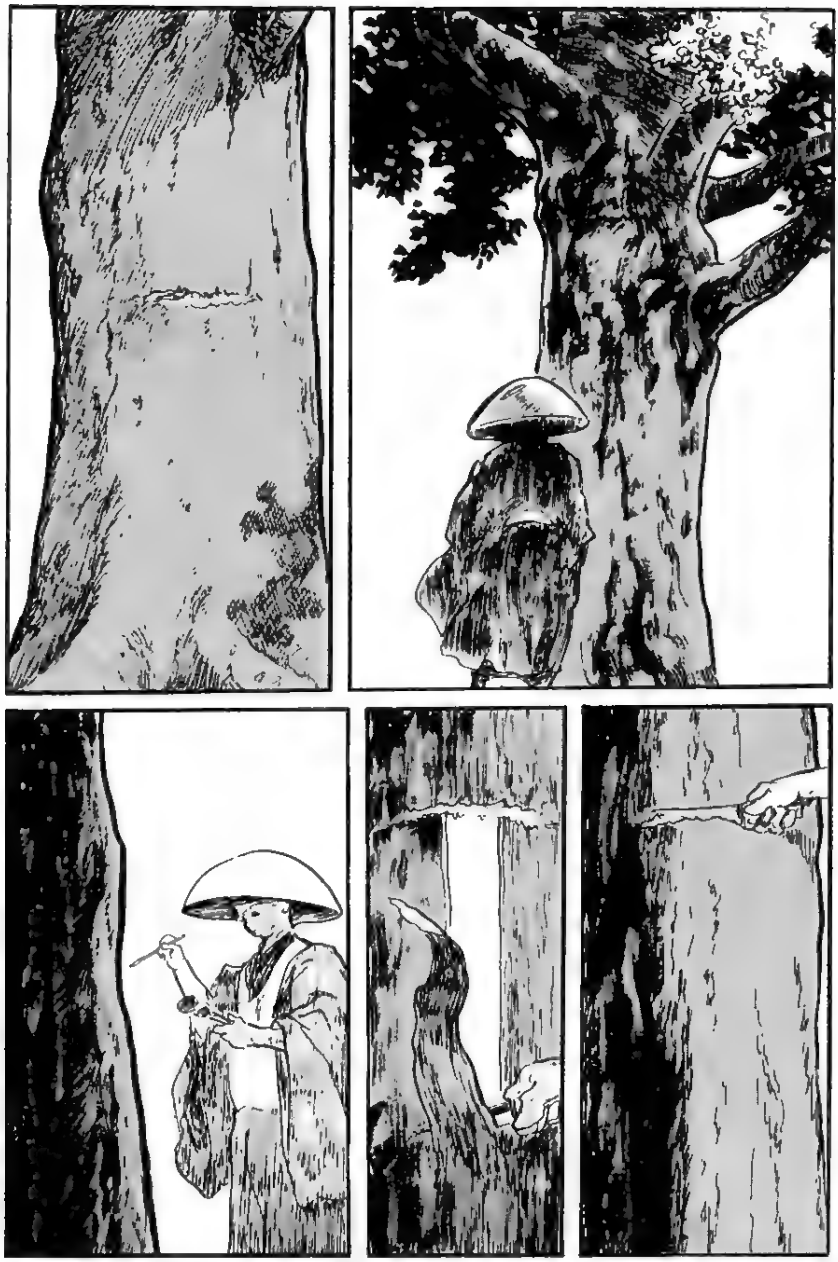
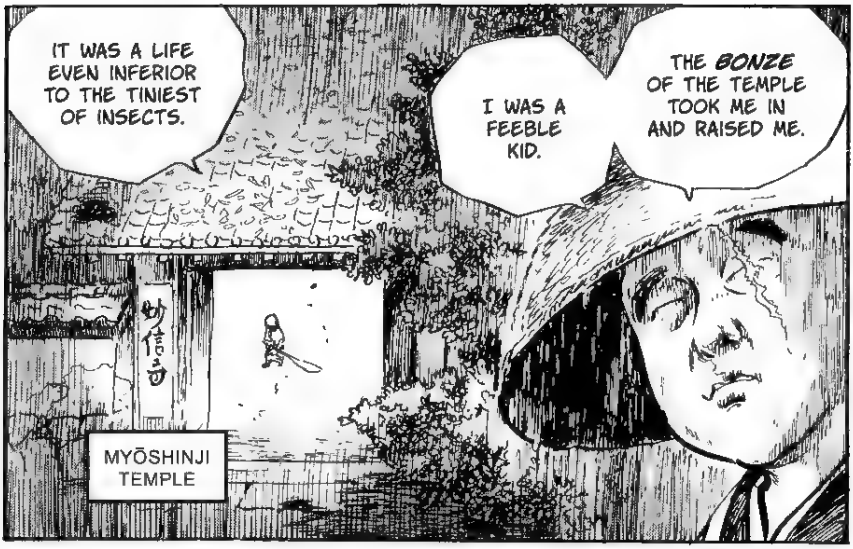
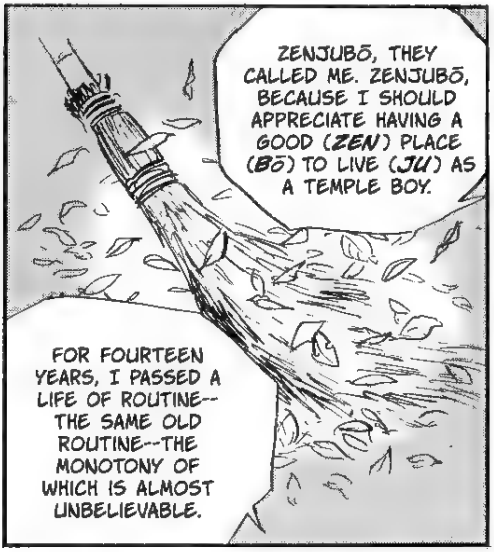


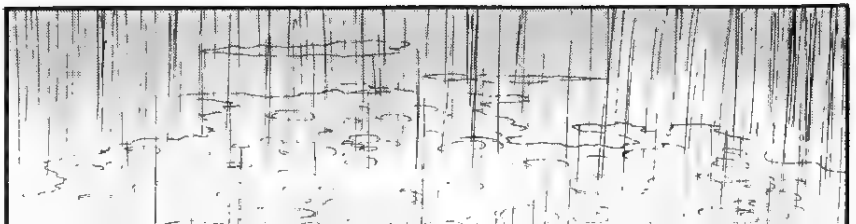
織田信長ここに死す
ODA NOBUNAGA DIES HERE
THE PLACE WAS CHIGUSA PASS.
LEAVING THE CAPITAL, NOBUNAGA WAS HEADING BACK TO GIFU ALONG THIS ROUTE.

RAIN.
ザーーーー
AH HA HA HA HA HA. AH HA HA HA HA.
I DON'T FEEL COLD AT ALL. MY HEART IS SUNNY AND I FEEL RICH.
I BET YOU'RE TRYING TO WET AND CHILL MY HEART, TOO. BUT I WON'T LET YOU.
I WAS A DESERTED BABY, LEFT AT THE GATE OF A TEMPLE.
I LED A WRETCHED, MEASLY EXISTENCE THAT COULD NOT ENDURE RAIN NOR WIND.
IF IT WAS ME LONG AGO, I'D BE FROZEN TO THE CORE. NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT.


IT WAS A LIFE EVEN INFERIOR TO THE TINIEST OF INSECTS.
I WAS A FEEBLE KID.
THE BONZE OF THE TEMPLE TOOK ME IN AND RAISED ME.
MYŌSHINJI TEMPLE


ZENJUBŌ, THEY CALLED ME. ZENJUBŌ, BECAUSE I SHOULD APPRECIATE HAVING A GOOD (ZEN) PLACE (BŌ) TO LIVE (JU) AS A TEMPLE BOY.
FOR FOURTEEN YEARS, I PASSED A LIFE OF ROUTINE--THE SAME OLD ROUTINE--THE MONOTONY OF WHICH IS ALMOST UNBELIEVABLE.

SINCE I WAS THREE, I RAKED AND GATHERED THE FALLEN LEAVES.
I BECAME THE TEMPLE BOY THE MOMENT THEY FOUND ME.



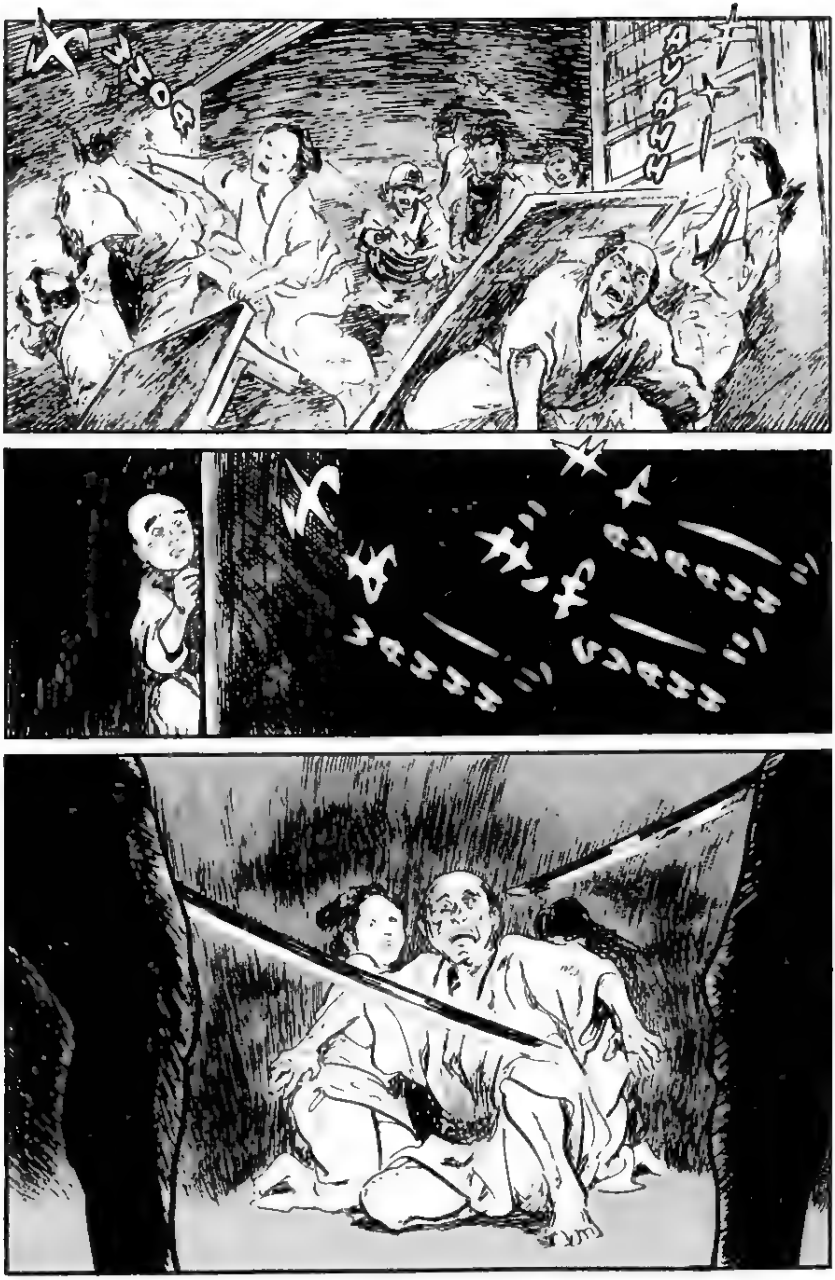
HIS HOUSE LOOKED AS IF IT COULD FIT A FEW TEMPLES INSIDE.
THE VILLAGE HEADMAN LIVED NEARBY.
AND THE DAUGHTER, A PRETTY GIRL.
HIS WIFE WAS A BEAUTIFUL LADY.

RAIN. THEY WERE BOTH TRULY ATTRACTIVE FEMALES.
BUT A MERE INSECT AS I WAS, THEY WERE OUT OF MY REACH.
ZAAAA

AAHHH
AHHHHH

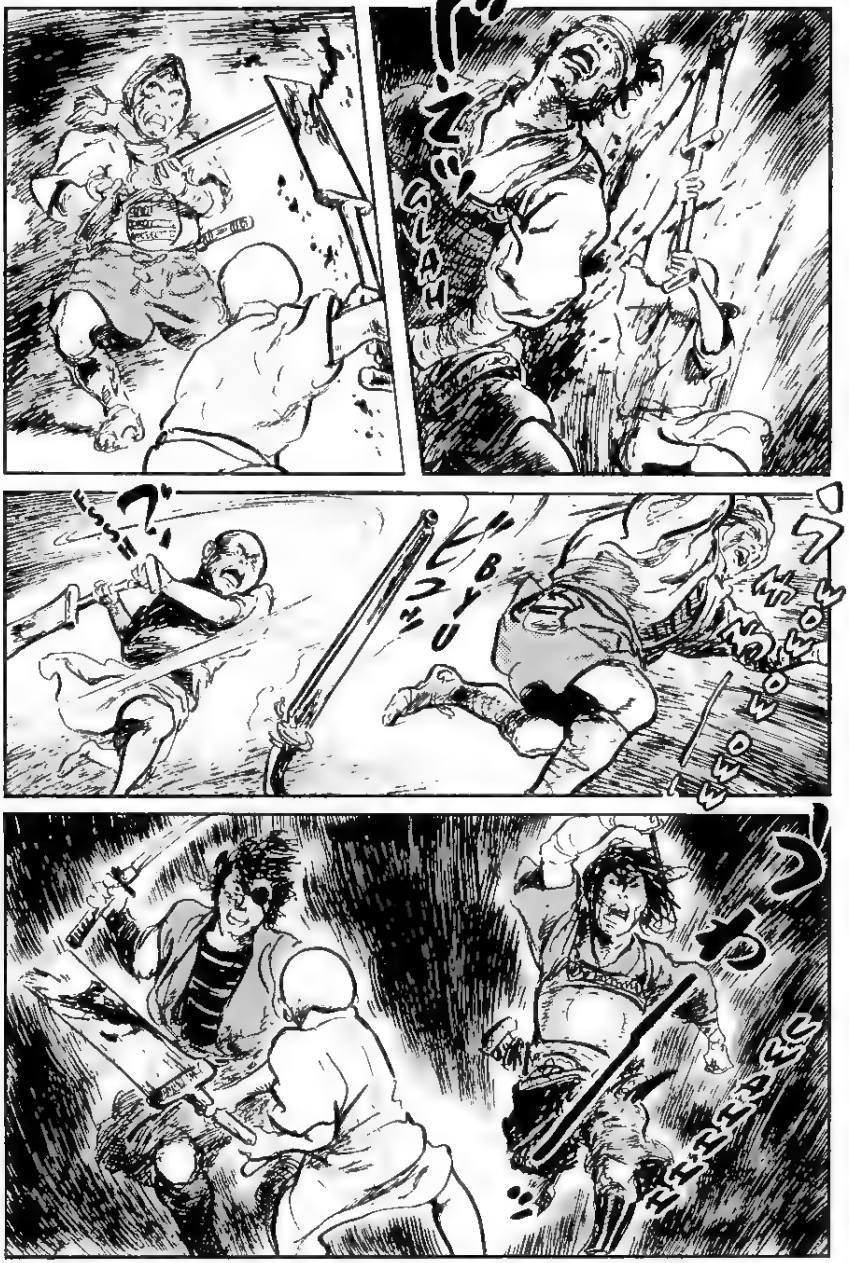
RAIN. IT'S COMING BACK.
YOU ARE WHAT'S REMINDING ME.

RAIN, I WAS FIFTEEN THAT SPRING NOBUSERI CAME AND ATTACKED
KRAKK-AK
BANNG


WHOA
AHH

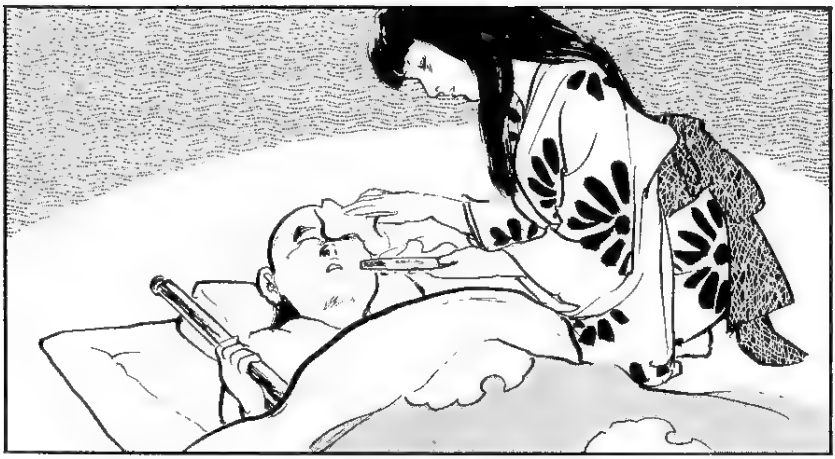
SHAAH!!
YAHHHH!!

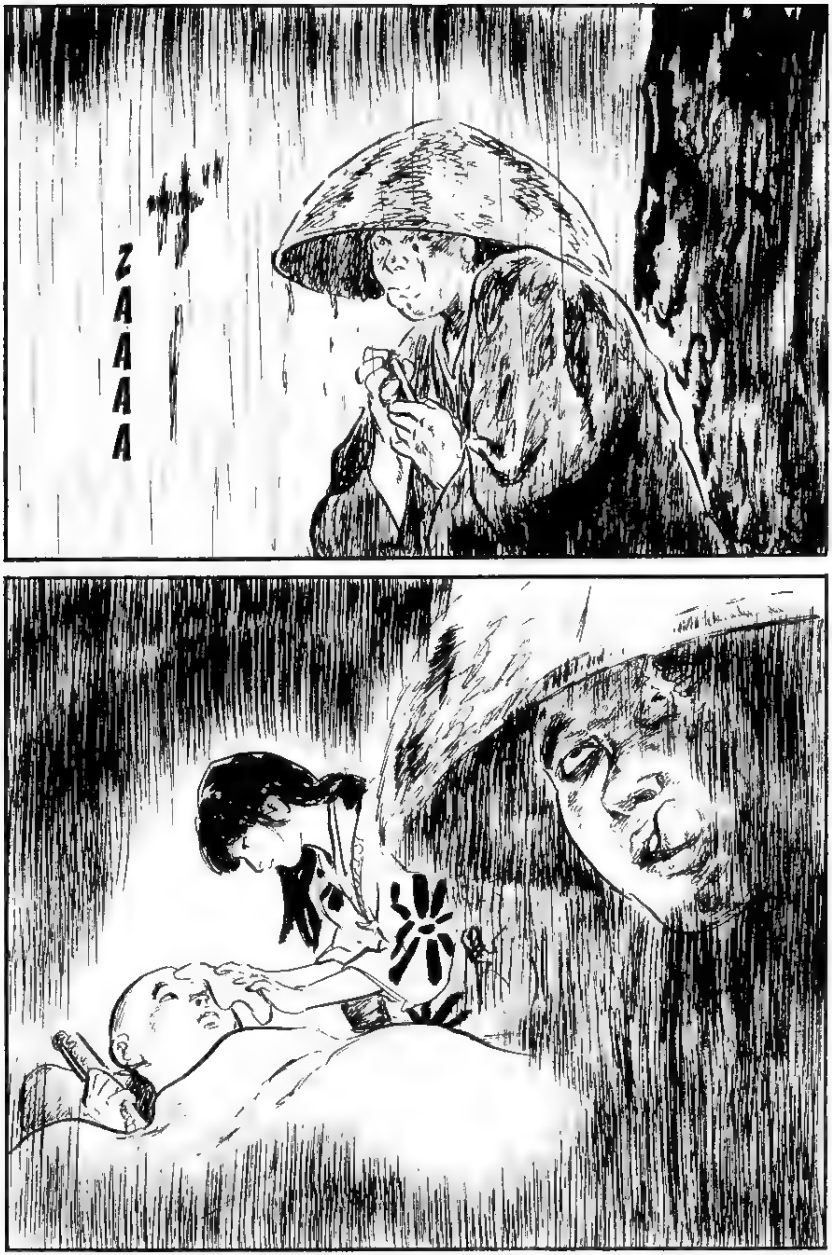
ヒュッ
ヒュッ
ヒュッ


GLAH
BYU
WOWOWOW

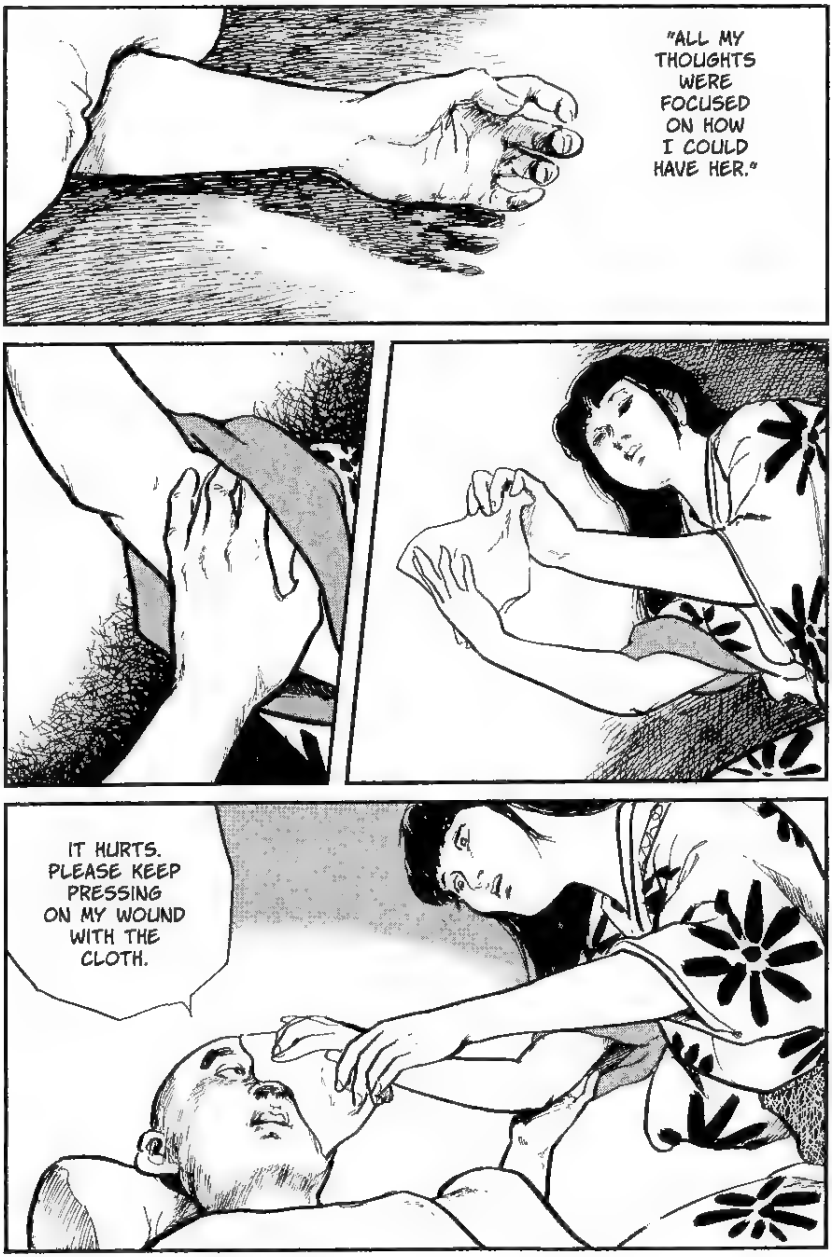
KYAHHH
SWAK'K
WAAHH
BOOM!

WHAT A NICE SOUND IT MADE. RAIN.
INDEED, THE GUN MADE A SWEET SOUND.
IT WAS THE SOUND THAT TOLD A BUG TO TRANSFORM INTO A BEAST.
RAIN. HUMANS ARE STRANGE CREATURES.
IT MUST BE A SPECIAL TRAIT GRANTED ONLY TO HUMANS TO BE ABLE TO FORGET ONESELF.
THAT DAY I SWUNG THE SPADE, COMPLETELY FORGETTING WHO I WAS.
IN FACT, I HAVEN'T REMEMBERED WHO I AM EVER SINCE. THAT'S WHY I NEVER FEEL THE COLD. YOU KNOW THAT, RAIN?
AH HA HA HA HA HA.
LOOK. I CAN EVEN MASTURBATE IN A STORM.

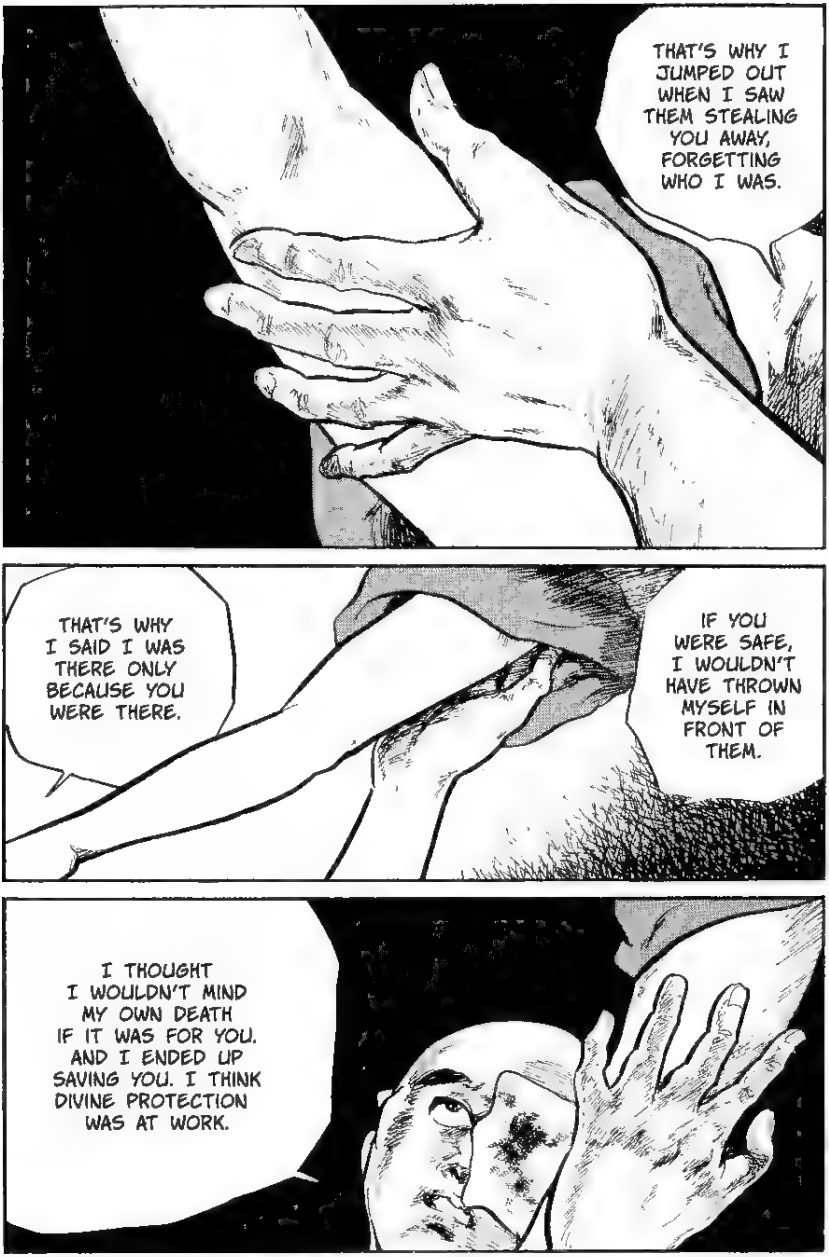


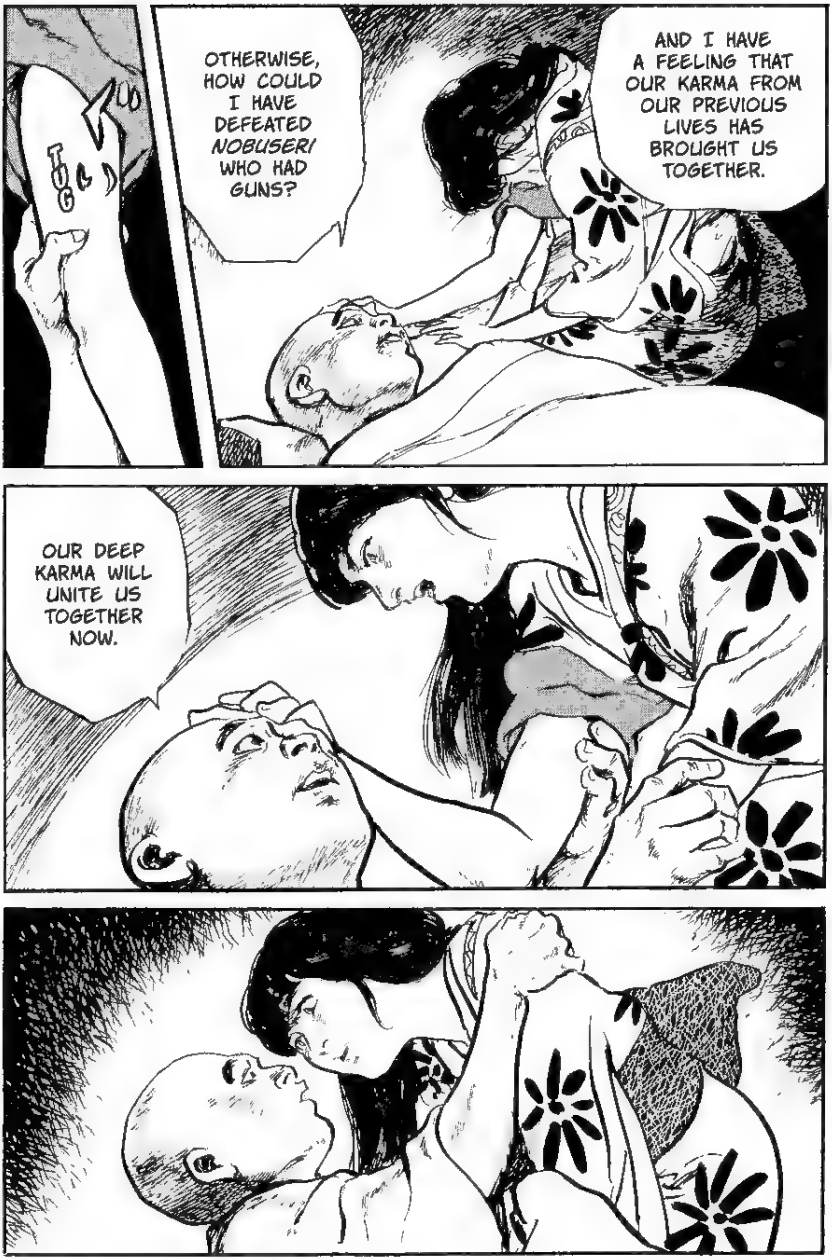

ZAAAA

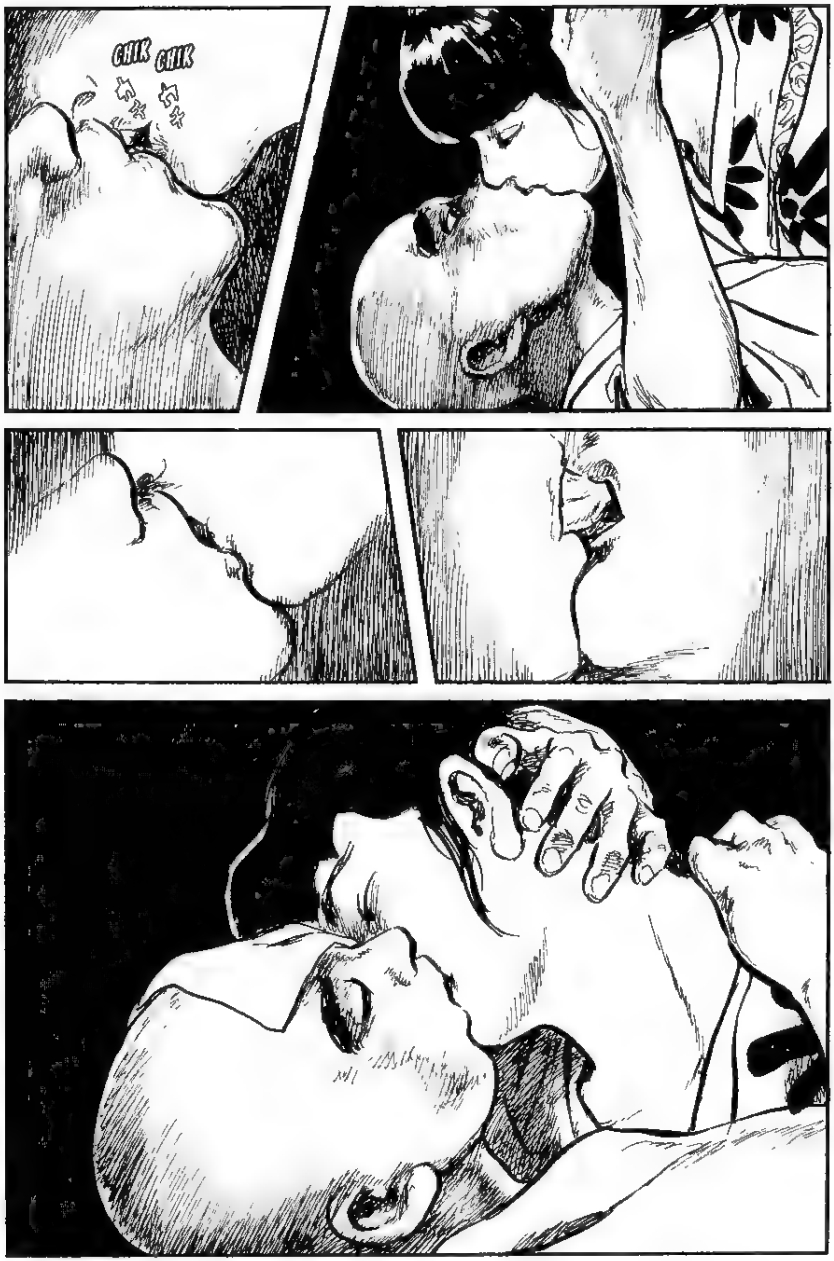
"RAIN. HUMAN NATURE IS A STRANGE THING.
"EVEN THOUGH I WAS SUFFERING UNBEARABLE AGONY, BECAUSE A BEAUTIFUL GIRL WAS NEARBY, I FELT NOTHING BUT A THROB OF LUST INSIDE ME.
"BUT THAT MOMENT, THE PAIN FROM MY WOUND WENT AWAY.
"SHE WAS A GIRL I'D COVETED KNOWING I COULD NEVER TOUCH HER.


"ALL MY THOUGHTS WERE FOCUSED ON HOW I COULD HAVE HER."
IT HURTS. PLEASE KEEP PRESSING ON MY WOUND WITH THE CLOTH.

THE NOBUSERI WOULD'VE KIDNAPPED YOU. YOU WOULD'VE BEEN RAPED NIGHT AFTER NIGHT, BY DIFFERENT MEN, BEFORE YOU WERE SOLD.
IF IT WASN'T FOR ME, YOU WOULDN'T BE HERE RIGHT NOW.
YOU ARE HERE ONLY BECAUSE OF ME. AND I WAS THERE ONLY BECAUSE YOU WERE THERE... THAT'S HOW WE BOTH GOT TO BE HERE TODAY.
YOUR FATE WOULD'VE BEEN DEATH AFTER THEY TOYED WITH YOU FOR PLEASURE, DAY AFTER DAY, UNTIL YOU BECAME A TATTERED RAG.
I WAS IN LOVE WITH YOU.


THAT'S WHY I JUMPED OUT WHEN I SAW THEM STEALING YOU AWAY, FORGETTING WHO I WAS.
THAT'S WHY I SAID I WAS THERE ONLY BECAUSE YOU WERE THERE.
IF YOU WERE SAFE, I WOULDN'T HAVE THROWN MYSELF IN FRONT OF THEM.
I THOUGHT I WOULDN'T MIND MY OWN DEATH IF IT WAS FOR YOU. AND I ENDED UP SAVING YOU. I THINK DIVINE PROTECTION WAS AT WORK.


TUG
OTHERWISE, HOW COULD I HAVE DEFEATED NOBUSERI WHO HAD GUNS?
AND I HAVE A FEELING THAT OUR KARMA FROM OUR PREVIOUS LIVES HAS BROUGHT US TOGETHER.
OUR DEEP KARMA WILL UNITE US TOGETHER NOW.


CHIK CHIK

SHUFF
しゅる
SHUFF
しゅる
OH NO.
DON'T.
SHUFF
DO
DO

あ！
あ！
あ——
あああ

NOOOH!
LOOK AT ME.
IF YOU WANT TO SEVER THE KARMA THAT CONNECTS US, THAT'S FINE. JUST REMEMBER, DIVINE PUNISHMENT WILL FALL UPON YOU.

AAAAAAAAAA

STOP IT!
WHA... WHAT THE!!
UMM
MY EYE... GIVE ME BACK MY EYE!
YOU... YOU'RE NO DIFFERENT FROM THE NOBUSER!!

DO YOU NOT PITY ME?
DO YOU RETURN MY KINDNESS WITH INGRATI-TUDE?
...WHILE I'M DIS-FIGURED!
YOU'RE UNHARMED...
ALL RIGHT.
P...PLEASE DO NOT... TOUCH MY DAUGHTER...

RAIN.
HUMAN NATURE IS A MADDENING THING.
WHO WOULD'VE THOUGHT A MOTHER AND DAUGHTER WOULD FIGHT OVER A MAN.

GLOSSARY

Akiyama Nobutomo
(1531–1575) A retainer in the service of the Takeda family who served under Takeda Shingen and Takeda Katsuyori.

ayakashi
A mask used in *noh* theater that represents a vindictive or violent ghost, god, or powerful warrior.

daimyō
Feudal lords.

fuchū
A provincial capital; the seat of a local government, a provincial office

fūrinkazan
Literally, "wind, forest, fire, and mountain." It was the battle flag used by Takeda Shingen, quoting *The Art of War*: "Move as swift as a wind, stay as silent as the forest, attack fierce like fire, unmovable defense like a mountain."

guiqulai
From the famous poem of Tao Yuanming, one of the most influential pre–Tang dynasty Chinese poets. It translates to "homecoming" or "returning home."

Hiraiwa Chikayoshi
(1542–1611) A trusted retainer under Tokugawa Ieyasu. It is known that Chikayoshi was a tutor to the eldest son of Ieyasu, Matsuraida Nobuyasu.

Hōjō Ujimasa
(1538–1590) The fourth head of the late Hojo clan, and *daimyo* of Odawara.

Hōjo Ujiyasu
(1515–1571) The son of Hōjō Ujitsuna and a great *daimyō* of the Odawara Hōjō clan

hōmyō
A Buddhist name. A kind of rank in the Buddhist temple.

Honda Heihachirō Tadakatsu
Also called Honda Heihachiro, he is generally regarded as one of Tokugawa Ieyasu's finest generals, and he fought in almost all of his master's major battles

honorifics
Japan is a class and status society, and proper forms of address are critical. Common markers of respect are the prefixes *o* and *go*, and a wide range of suffixes. Some of the suffixes you will encounter in *Path of the Assassin*:
dono – archaic; used for higher-ranked or highly respected figures.
san – the most common, used among equals or near equals.
sama – used for superiors. Sometimes spoken as "*saa*."
sensei – used for teachers, masters, respected entertainers, and politicians.

Igamono
"Men of Iga."

jizamurai
Literally "samurai of the land," "samurai of the soil." *Jizamurai* were rural samurai who often lived close to the land and were not entirely removed from the peasantry.

Kakegawa
A river that runs through the western part of Shizuoka prefecture. It is also the name of a city located in Shizuoka prefecture.

Kōfu
A city in Kai province (today's Yamanachi prefecture)

Lake Hamana
A lake situated in the western part of Shizuoka prefecture (formerly Tōtōmi), on the border with Aichi prefecture.

measurement
1 *kan* = 8.27 lb.
200 *kan* = 1,653.47 lb.
6 *monme* = 0.79 oz.
1 *ri* = 3.93 km.

Mt. Tenno
A mountain facing the Otokoyama (literally, "man's mountain") across the Yodo River. Commanding the routes out of the Kyoto basin, this was a strategically important mountain in military terms and also for transport. Often referred to in popular speech as "tennozan."

nokizaru
Ninja

Ōi River
A river in Shizuoka prefecture. It once formed the border between Tōtōmi and Suruga provinces.

Okudaira Sadakatsu
The son of Okudaira Sadamasa and the father of Okudaira Sadayoshi.

onriedo
The text of a sutra, meaning "Leave the depraved land. Pursue the peaceful world."

oyakata
A term used to address the head of the clan by the clan members. It translates to "house lord."

saisaku
Ninja spy/ninja spies

Sekinen Hachiya
The first son of Ihoro Sekinen, who started the Hachiya clan. Every successor also used the same name, Hachiya Kakubei Sekinen.

suppa/shinobi
Ninja

Suwa clan
The Suwa clan of the Shinano province had more or less unknown ancestors. Even though this is true, many believe that the Suwa clan is descended from Minamoto Tsunetomo. During the middle of the sixteenth century, the Suwa were defeated by the Takeda but later went on as vassals under them.

Takeda Nobutoyo
A son of Takeda Nobushige, who was a younger brother of Takeda Shingen. In other words, Nobutoyo was Shingen's nephew.

Takeda Yoshinobu
The eldest son and heir of Takeda Shingen.

Tōkai region
A subregion of Chubu, Japan, along the Pacific Ocean. The name comes from Tōkaido, one of the Edo five routes.

Tōtōmi province
An old province in the area of Japan that is today western Shizuoka prefecture.

umeboshi
A salty, tart condiment made from pickled Japanese plums.

Yamagata Masakage
(1524–1575) One of the twenty-four generals of the Takeda clan, he was famous for his red armor and skill on the battlefield.

KAZUO KOIKE

Though widely respected as a powerful writer of graphic fiction, Kazuo Koike has spent a lifetime reaching beyond the bounds of the comics medium. Aside from co-creating and writing such classic manga as *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Crying Freeman,* Koike has hosted the popular *Shibi Golf Weekly* instructional television program; founded the *Albatross View* golf magazine; produced movies; written popular fiction, poetry, and screenplays; and mentored some of Japan's best manga talent.

Koike started the *Gekiga Sonjuku,* a college course aimed at helping talented writers and artists—such as *Ranma 1/2* creator Rumiko Takahashi—break into the comics field. His methods and teachings continue to influence new generations of manga creators, not to mention artists and writers around the world. Examples of Koike's influence range from the comics works of Frank Miller and Stan Sakai to the films of Quentin Tarantino.

The driving focus of Koike's narrative is character development, and his commitment to the character is clear: "Comics are carried by characters. If a character is well-created, the comic becomes a hit." Kazuo Koike's continued success in comics and literature has proven this philosophy true.

Kazuo Koike continues to work in the entertainment media to this very day, consistently diversifying his work and forging new paths across the rough roads of Edo-period history and the green swaths of today's golfing world.

GOSEKI KOJIMA

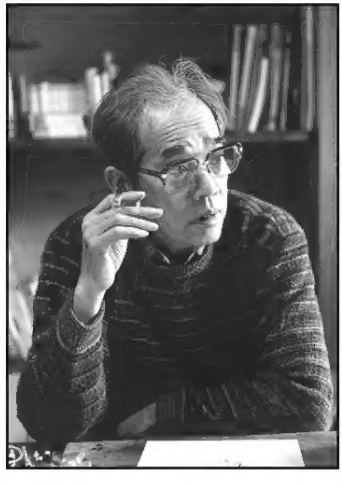
Goseki Kojima was born on November 3, 1928, the very same day as the godfather of Japanese comics, Osamu Tezuka. Art was a Kojima family tradition, his own father an amateur portrait artist and his great-great-grandfather a sculptor.

In 1950, Kojima moved to Tokyo, where the postwar devastation had given rise to special manga forms for audiences too poor to buy the new manga magazines just starting to reach the newsstands. Kojima created art for *kami-shibai*, or "paper-play" narrators, who would use manga story sheets to present narrated street plays, and later moved on to creating works for the *kashi-bon* market, bookstores that rented out books, magazines, and manga to mostly low-income readers.

In 1967, Kojima broke into the magazine market with his ninja adventure, *Dojinki*. As the manga magazine market grew and diversified, he turned out a steady stream of popular samurai manga series.

In 1970, in collaboration with Kazuo Koike, Kojima began the work that would seal his reputation, *Kozure Okami* (*Lone Wolf and Cub*). Many additional series would follow, including *Path of the Assassin* and *Samurai Executioner.*

In his final years, Kojima turned to creating original graphic novels based on the movies of his favorite director, the great Akira Kurosawa. Kojima passed away on January 5, 2000, at the age of seventy-one.



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Published by Dark Horse Comics, Inc.
in association with Soeisha Inc.

Dark Horse Comics, Inc.
10956 SE Main Street
Milwaukie OR 97222
www.darkhorse.com

First edition: June 2008
ISBN 978-1-59307-512-5

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Canada

Path of the Assassin Vol. 11: Hikuma Castle
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Hanzō, the hero ninja for the future shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa, has been in some tight situations before, but nothing like the trap set for him by a ninja from a competing warlord's clan! And to settle this trickery, a sexy battle of wits and weapons. Meanwhile, Tokugawa is moving across the battlefield on his way to Japan's future.

Path of the Assassin is a pinnacle in *Lone Wolf and Cub* creators Koike and Kojima's fantastic and seemingly unending stable of awesome samurai manga. And as usual, these works don't wane as they draw toward their final volumes!

Stick with us to the end, or pick up a volume and read back to the beginning! Either way it's a satisfying adventure.

Lifelong Friends, with the Same Dreams, Striving to Grow into a Rising River.

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